



俺の死にフラグが留まることを知らない

3

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Illustration Aちき

ORE no SHIBOU FLAG ga
Tomomaru tokoro
wo Shiranai

My Death Flags Show No Sign of Ending

vol.3

by Izumi

[Novel Updates](#)

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Chapter 48

The author intentionally time skipped without revealing how he escaped the predicament he was in last chapter.

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Located in the northwest of the Ribel Kingdom there is a by no means large town called Attis. Although not quite a rural village, it has lush greenery and in one sweep of the eye one can see a lake spread out before a mountain range several thousand meters tall in all its beauty in the refreshing sun.

In that Attis, there is a small restaurant in the corner of the town. A little past noon, during a time that where customers are sparse, a lone girl raises her voice bitterly.

“Aah, Why can’t I pass!?”

Sitting at the counter, although not quite drunk she kept repeating the same complaint.

Maybe because he couldn’t overlook her, the owner called out to the girl.

“You seem pretty mad, Jou-chan.”

“Of course I’m mad! Even though I came all this way, how could it be blocked off right before my eyes...”

“Blocked off?”

“I want to go there.”

The girl points outside the window at the symbol of the mountain range, Mount Giran and answers.

The shop owner reacts almost too surprised to that answer.

“Eeh!? Jou-chan, you plan on entering Mount Giran?”

“What about it?”

“Give up! I don’t know what your objective is but there are a lot of monsters in the mountains.”

“I know. That’s why there’s a restriction to entering the mountain. For that reason I hired those guys to come with me...!”

As she remembered, her anger returned.

Mount Giran exceeds 4000 meters with the last 1000 meters is always covered in snow; it’s the largest mountain in the Ribel Kingdom. Adding onto just the difficulty of climbing it, the snowy mountain is dominated by powerful monsters.

That’s why she hired 5 mercenaries to act as her guards. It seemed favorable until they arrived at Attis, but when she told them they were climbing Mount Giran they scattered in all directions.

Just that proves how dangerous it was, but she couldn’t accept it. She paid half up-front but the journey didn’t have many perils so she couldn’t help but feel like she was ripped off.

At any rate, for various reasons the girl — Lifa was angry.

“The capable people in this town also turned me down...”

With no spirit Lifa spits out the words as if they were poison. Seeing that a bitter smile appears on the shop owner’s face. Because they live in Attis they all deeply understand the dangers of Mount Giran.

“It can’t be helped. You need permission from the Knight Order to climb Mount Giran anyway.”

TL Note: I believe the Knight Order is the Chivalric Order from the previous translation but I’m not sure so I’ll leave it as is.

The ones that give permission to enter the mountains is the Knight Order that are currently blockading the mountain range. They won’t give out permissions to someone with superficial strength.

For that reason Lifa hired mercenaries, but since they ran away the problem is she can’t receive permission.

Coming all this way and not being able to do anything.

“Is there anyway I can enter~...”

Rifa fell down on the counter table.

When she did that, the bell for the shops entrance rang as it opened.

Then a little after it opened surprise spread in the shop.

Sensing the disturbance Rifa turns around.

The first impression is black. A young man who's atmosphere was filled with indifference stood there. Looking at all the customers with distant eyes he mumbled something to himself. It couldn't be described as a good atmosphere.

"Who's that?"

Being caught by the surrounding customers tension Rifa asks the shop owner in a small voice. But the answer came from a different place.

"He's Harold Stokes. He carries the nickname 'Knight Killer' and is the country's strongest swordsman. Before he was called 'Bad Boy Harold'."

"Hmmm... And, you are?"

"I'm just a humble traveler."

Sporting grey hair and honey color eyes with an androgynous face and voice. The traveler had a large inflated yellow hat that stood out.

Although the traveler seemed to about Rifa's age she could not tell if the traveler was a boy or a girl.

"Before that, Harold Stokes is quite an infamous name. Do you not know it?"

"Unfortunately his infamy hasn't reached where I'm from."

More accurately, Rifa was a bit of an eccentric and was isolated in her hometown so learning something by hearsay is completely impossible. She hungrily pursues her own interests, but anything else is shutout. It's her first time hearing about someone with the dangerous nickname of 'Knight Killer'.

But for Rifa that kind of thing didn't matter. The important matter was the next point.

"You said he was the strongest swordsman in the country. Is that strong?"

"Of course. To the degree that he could take on the several tens of the elites of the Knight Order and come out unharmed. His strength could be said to be near the current head of the Knight Order, Vincent."

TL Note: It is the same order looks like but I'm too lazy to change it. So it will now be Knight Order!

"So he's in the strongest class of humans then."

Rifa's pupils glittered suspiciously.

If he's that strong then he could probably get permission to go to Mount Giran.

"Oi oi, Jou-chan, it can't be..."

Seeing through her intentions the owner tried to stop her but his voice fell on deaf ears.

Standing up with vigor she quickly walked until she was standing in front of Harold.

The 140 cm tall Rifa looks up at the 180 cm tall Harold. However there wasn't a speck of hesitation in Rifa.

"Got a minute?"

"...Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Rifa. You're Harold right?"

"..."

Harold doesn't confirm or deny. Just silence.

But his face warps in distaste. From the previous talks it seems he's famous, but it looks like he doesn't like that.

Feeling that Rifa continues the conversation.

"I have a request that suits your capabilities. Of course there will be a reward."

"Request, is it?"

"That's right. I want you to climb Mount Giran with me as my guard!"



Walnut colored hair done up in braids. A blouse with red as its base, a miniskirt with a check pattern, and knee-high socks; a set of clothing full of cleverness. Above all, her characteristic white robe that went down to her knees.

Rifa Goodridge.

Harold encountered the self-styled genius inventor that could be said to be the head of the loli department in the hero's party. Moreover she asked him to be her guard.

(I just wanted to get some food, how'd it become this...)

Rifa isn't from Attis but rather Weiss village. Harold isn't sure why she's here but since he's in the middle of a job he has no obligation to listen to her request.

He doesn't but strangely their destination is the same Mount Giran.

Although they're only separated by 3 years he looked down at Rifa who had a height difference with him that was closer to a child and an adult. With a confidence that didn't match her stature she gazed back at Harold. From the top of her head 2 antennae-like strands of hair stood up proudly.

"A little brat like you wants to climb a mountain? Don't make me laugh."

TL Note: Although 'kisama' is normally translated as bastard I think it sounds a bit awkward calling girls that. The literal translation of kisama is just a very rude way to say you, so I'm going to take some liberties.

"Even though I look like this I'm 15 years old!"

I knew that. Compared to her age, including her height, various parts haven't grown well but it's clear that she's around 15 years old.

That was the setting of her profile, too.

"In the first place what's your objective? That mountain doesn't have anything like toys or amusement parks."

"I want to get data on the body of a Hydra. If possible a sample too."

On Rifa's words, not only Harold but everyone in the store lost their words. The Hydra is Mount Giran's chief. In short it's a boss monster. Mercenaries and knights would only be lambs to the slaughter at most.

In the game if the party fought it around level 20 they'd probably win. But that's only assuming they challenge it in a group. For Rifa to challenge it alone there's the danger of her dying.

In the first place just getting to the Hydra alone is dubious. The encounter rate of monsters in Mount Giran was high.

Considering that it was the right choice to ask Harold to be her guard.

“But I don’t have any obligation to listen to your stupid request?”

“I’m not forcing you. I’ll ask others.”

“I don’t think such a suicidal guy can be found easily though.”

“...a month or half a year, I’ll keep at it. I have a reason to go that far.”

He could feel her obstinacy. If Harold refused she’d probably keep looking for months like she said.

But that’s where the problem is. It’s just before the start of the original work. Originally if Rifa who met Liner’s group at Weiss village wasn’t there, the original work’s party was in danger of being very different. In the game, when she joined the party the ‘compound’ command became available.

If handled poorly they might not be able to make items and weapons. At the worst they won’t be able to obstruct the miasma breaking out in the Sumeragi territory or stop Justus’ plans.

Her magic and scientific knowledge were important to the continuation of the story as well.

In short if Rifa is stuck at Attis the situation wouldn’t be very good. Then it’s better if he did his job along with taking the request and quickly send her back.

“...Fine. If you’ll take my conditions I’ll lend my power.”

“Eh, really!? Yatta-!”

Without even hearing his conditions Rifa wholeheartedly celebrates. Looking at the girl in front of him he was definitely going to be dropped into a dangerous situation, thought Harold as he sighed.

Then before the conversation could be settled an interruption came.

“What an interesting conversation.”

A voice, like Rifa’s, that Harold was used to hearing from the game. A casket cap and yellow overalls. Inside those clothes wearing nothing but a

cotton wrap around the chest. And a packed shawl bag resting on the shoulder. A 15–16 year old boy or girl that could be said to be beautiful for either gender stood there while smiling.

“If it’s alright, I hope I can come along too.”

Before he knew it standing next to him was the information broker Giffelt who asked without breaking a smile.

Chapter 49

(Lita's Pov)

The day after her meeting with Harold, Lita was facing the border checkpoint of the Giran snow mountain that was managed by the knight order. Naturally, Harold was present as well, and so was the androgynous person from the day before for some reason. He seemed to be called Elu.

As a knight was about to block their way, Harold, who was walking approximately three steps ahead of Lita, took out a parchment from his breast pocket and pointed it at him. Upon finding out the other party was Harold, the knights, who were hostile at first, had complete changes of expression. Though Lita was lost as she had no way of finding out what was written on the parchment, the knights didn't even try to conceal their hatred as they turned cold gazes towards Harold who was entering the mountain.

However, he was not one to bother with the likes of them and he rudely pursued his advance. He seemed to know the path to the summit of the mountain.

While looking at the man's cold back, a question crossed Lita's mind, just who was this Harold person to be the target of so much hatred from the knights? From her talk with Elu and the reactions in the restaurant the day before, he seemed to be quite famous. Thinking about it with a composed mind, his title《Knight killer》was extremely alarming, too.

Lita's purpose was to record data on an ice Hydra, but the man called Harold had picked her interest as well.

And she was not someone who had enough self control to hold her intellectual curiosity at bay.

While walking on a mountain path where a little snow still remained, she questioned him.

"Say, Harold. Why do you go by the alias "Knight killer?"

"It has nothing to do with me, it's just people jeering on their own accord."

"Didn't it start with that one event five years ago?"

Elu broke into the conversation and from his way of speech, he seemed to know about Harold's past to some extent. But Harold glared at Elu as if telling him to stay silent.

The glare was powerful enough to make even Lita shiver, regardless of the bravery that she took pride on. This might be what they call "blood thirst.

However, Harold did not utter a word.

As howling sounds rose from behind the trees, a pack of white wolves appeared. Perhaps the group had stepped in their territory, for the pack was already ready for combat.

The white wolf is a beautiful monster, with fur as pure white as the snow it steps on.

But in contrast to its appearance, it has quite the violent behavior. And though the white wolf is not very strong by itself, caution is advised when encountering a large group of them for they share a habit of swarming their opponents.

Lita organized the information in her head.

She had done some research on the monsters which are distributed on mount Giran beforehand, in search of countermeasures against them. She put her right hand inside her white coat and took out three white tubes, placing them between her fingers.

Then she carelessly threw them with the pack of white wolves as her target.

Having failed to hit them because of the rough aim, the glass test tubes fell to the ground and broke into pieces.

The next moment, an explosion occurred as a deafening noise resounded. The white wolves that were caught by the flames scattered into multiple pieces of meat.

In but a single move, the combat had come to its end.

"The power is not bad, I guess"(Lita)

Lita made a satisfied nod.

To begin with, the attack was developed with dealing damage to a large-scale monster like the ice Hydra in mind. For a small monster, one blow was enough.

"It's my first time seeing such magic. How did you do it?"(Elu)

"Trade secret. Well, it's not what you'd call ordinary magic, that's all I'll say!"

(Lita)

Lita cockily put her hand on her waist.

Whether or not it could be classified as magic was up for debate, but the girl was confident. And being admired by Elu didn't feel bad at all for her. As for Harold, he was indifferent, and on the contrary, he criticized and advised Lita.

"You'll never see the bottom of the well if toys of this level put you in high spirits."

"What was that?"

She couldn't keep silent when her masterpiece was being mocked as a toy. However, the moment Lita was about to erupt, her vision was covered by a blinding light. Unable to bear it, Lita closed her eyelids as something passed right beside her.

Immediately after, a shriek-like voice resounded from behind.

Looking over her shoulder when the momentary flash of light ended, there were white wolves... scorched and dead. Apparently, they had made a pincer attack and were about to strike her from the rear.

Lita was unable to sense their presence. She might have died there and then if it weren't for Harold.

"Regardless of the excellent means of attack you have, if you're negligent in battle, you're lower than second rate. If you want to die in vain, do it elsewhere."

"Agh...."

Having said that much, Harold turned around and got back to walking once again.

His way of talking was irritating, but that didn't make him any less right.

Harold's words had an unbelievable weight to them. For that very reason, she was honestly pleased by his evaluation towards her weapons that he deemed "excellent."

Did that come from the heaviness of the path he took in life? Surely he didn't get the title "knight killer" stuck to him by living peacefully and uneventfully.

"Are you interested? About his past, I mean."

Elu whispered in her ear so that Harold wouldn't hear.
If she had to answer, naturally the answer would be yes.

"Well, actually..."

It wasn't like Lita at all to have a hard time answering.
Though she was interested, no matter how she thought about it, Harold had to be shouldering an atypical past. She felt guilty hearing about it from others instead of the person himself.
Curiosity and ethics were struggling within her.

"Like I said, I'll tell you, but what I do happen to know about him isn't some important secret or whatever, you know?"

Elu's story was based on many anecdotes and rumors concerning Harold, whether those were true or not was a different matter. The details regarding the events created by Harold were public knowledge it seemed, save for Lita who didn't know anything about him.

In other words, everyone knows the facts, and people have spread countless rumors to complement the details.

"The ratio of speculations to facts is higher than I thought, weren't you and Harold acquaintances?"

"No way, yesterday was my first time meeting him, same as you."

Said Elu as if stating the obvious. However, that raised another question.

"Then, why come with us?"(Lita)

"I've been interested in him for a while now for various reasons. And it was a unique occasion to hear the stories directly from him"(Elu)

"So you came to such a dangerous zone with that as a motive, huh?"(Lita)

"Honestly, I didn't think I'd be allowed to follow you so easily"(Elu)

Ahaha, he laughed, having lost his spirit.
He said he was a traveler so he likely had some means of fighting up his sleeve, but his speech coupled with his appearance made him look like a small herbivore that walked into a wild beast's territory. It felt like he would be eaten

the second he got out of sight.

"Well, let's leave that aside. So, what will you do?"(Elu)

(..... I'm going to travel with Harold for several days after this, and I won't lose anything if I ask, right?)

Lita eventually convinced herself and finally let her curiosity take over her.



(Elu's Pov)

When talking about the one named Harold Stokes, the words that would come up without fail were "The youngest to enroll in the knight order in history. At the time, he was glorified as a genius, however, that period was very short. Several months after joining, he did his first mission. And thereupon, he fled from the enemy despite his superior officer ordering him to cease and desist. Furthermore, he was wearing a uniform of the Sarian empire when he was found and was therefore charged with suspicions of being a spy.

From this, Harold was sentenced to decapitation..... or rather he was supposed to be, but they backed down.

That was due to the raising voices of the Stokes family, the house of Harold's parents, and the Sumeragi family, who had engaged their daughter to him, and part of the knight order, too.

It was especially thanks to the Sumeragi house, it was a prestigious family of aristocrats, and their head, a man of great virtue, appealed to a reduction of penalty.

Afterwards, as a result of the retrial, Harold was transferred to a certain laboratory. It was a place of research and practical experiments. They found out his suitability as a test subject and he was freed from his prison sentence, not to mention his death penalty, in exchange of cooperating free of charge. Of course, in case of a breach of the terms, he would be sentenced to the capital punishment once again. And so, Harold has been surviving as a test subject of the research establishment up until today.

"And well, that's basically the way Harold is generally known, I guess?"

"What's wrong with that guy? He's the worst"

The sun had set, and since climbing anymore would have been difficult, they pitched some tents to set up camp.

Harold pitched his tent at a distant position where he took charge of the night watch. Using that chance, Elu and Lita continued their talk, concealing their voices in a single tent.

Incidentally, Lita didn't seem to mind being in the same tent as Elu. Though she didn't know his/her gender yet.

"Moreover, to top it off, Harold brought disgrace to his benefactors, the Sumeragi family. He strongly appealed to the cancelling of his marriage arrangement after discussing it again."

"Oh come on, that guy is lowest than the worst garbage at this point"

Regarding Harold's human nature that Elu described, Lita let out a voice filled with scorn. Well, that's an understandable reaction when having heard only this much.

However, Elu's mouth did not stop moving.

"Now that you've heard me, do you understand why the hate towards Harold has spread so far?"

"I understand all too well"

"But you see, there are too many points of this story still left in the dark."

"Left in the dark?"

"Yeah, and that's precisely why I took interest in him."

Upon hearing of the deliberation of the judges' panel, the first thing Elu thought was: could they really give the capital punishment to a son of nobility so easily?

"Harold's only crime was escaping from the enemy. In addition, it was a sudden combat that occurred as he was patrolling during his very first mission. It's not unusual for frightened recruits to run away."

"Then it was because he was a spy from the empire, right?"

"Wrong, he was "suspected of being a spy. In fact, there is no proof of Harold being a spy from the empire and he didn't cause any damage either."

"...What do you mean?"

"Harold was simply wearing a service uniform of the empire, his motives for that were completely unknown."

"Doesn't that make it obvious?"

"Even if it does, then it should have been clearly specified, and yet in the document they only wrote "suspicion."

Clearly, it was odd. The punishment he received was too heavy for the crimes he committed.

If he really was a spy, they should have specified it in the decision document, and even then, they were too hasty.

"Though they're not an influential house, the Stokes family are respected nobles. Do you think it would be possible to give the death penalty to the heir of said house after only two weeks of deliberations?"

"That's..."

"Usually, for a spy, they'd prioritize drawing out information from him rather than killing him. And I've never heard of the court abandoning charges on a death penalty."

His case was unprecedented.

It seemed to Elu like the motive behind the deliberation was irrelevant and they had already decided on their judgement from the very beginning.

No, rather, it was a premise to the overruling of said judgement...

"I understand why you said it's odd, but how do you know so many details, Elu? Is this really your first meeting with him?"

"It really is. However, as a traveler, my reputation and connections have spread quit far. I get to hear stories from various people."

More exactly, he has his ways to hear those stories.

Sometimes acting the part of a traveler, other times a merchant, an aristocrat or even a reporter. He's a master of impersonating false identities.

And he has more than enough connections to get close to his targets. This time, he was able to find out Harold's whereabouts by catching onto the information

network of a colleague of his.

"I see, I see, then have you not tried asking one of Harold's acquaintances? That should shed some light on the truth."

"I did. Then, how about I share a talk I had with the one who was Harold's superior officer at the time?"

Elu had met him three years prior. He was Harold's superior officer, the man who raised his voice in protest earlier than anyone in the knight order when the death penalty was pronounced.

Cody Luzial. He recalled the languid face of the man.

Elu had crossed paths with Cody at a bar where he was heavily drunk, yet when Harold's name came up, Cody desperately moved his shaky mouth and let out everything he had on his heart.

『In my work, I've met my share of idiots... "The reckless idiot, obsessed by his sense of justice and "The selfish idiot, who only thinks about himself and the others were classified as, well, "Just an idiot.....』

His right hand was gripping his glass while his left hand's fingers were counting the various types of fools he had met. And then, he gulped down the glass' content in one go and leaked out a breath reeking of alcohol. Finally, he added.

『That guy was "The idiot who never cared for himself』

With his words, he raised the curtain on the real story. This is the prelude to the relentless half-life of Harold Stokes.

Chapter 50

— Five years ago.

The 933rd year of the Loiza calendar, in the Amagir kingdom.

It was a few hours after Harold was sentenced to decapitation and was forced to the jail in the tribunal's basement. Cody was standing in Vincent's office.

"Why the hell would Harold need to be executed?!"

Cody pressed the office's owner for answers. His face was unusually bitter. But even the one who was being pressed, Vincent, had a sour and distorted face, as if he had just eaten a bug.

"Except for myself, everyone agreed with this judgement, including the commander, Mr.Cox. They haven't even checked the facts yet, this punishment is just too heavy..."

Harold certainly had some strange points to him and he was suspected of being a spy, too. But still, this time's judgement had jumped over too many steps, it would be hard for anyone to say that justice had been served.

".....What you're saying is that someone put the squeeze on the judges?"

"I'm afraid that's the case. To stop Harold's execution, we'll have to find that person."

Although Vincent had his thoughts concerning Harold, he didn't think he committed a crime deserving of being killed. He gave Cody a rough report on the circumstances.

His suspicions might not have been completely dispelled, but he still was against the execution.

"So the deadline is in one week..."(*Cody*)

There was too little time. Asking him to look for the one pulling the strings in such a short time period was like asking him to find a needle in a haystack. Besides, finding the puppet master wouldn't necessarily stop him. However, if he didn't do it, Harold would die. So even if it seemed impossible, any plan was a good plan.

Though Cody and his friends started making their moves enthusiastically, the situation took a turn for the worst the very next day. After his execution was decided, some bad rumors concerning Harold started spreading within the knight order, and they reached the streets in no time. Moreover, the contents of the deliberations had been maliciously twisted, with no regard for the facts.

From this, Cody was convinced that someone was trying to kill Harold. And so the right atmosphere for the execution had now been installed. Once it got to that point, Harold's bad reputation had naturally reached a certain girl's ears.

"I deeply apologize for my repeated sudden visits."

Said Erica, Harold's fiancée, with a bow. She had paid a visit to Cody once again.

Her motives were clear. It was about the veracity of Harold's execution, and the malicious rumors, the source of which was still unknown.

Honest as he was, Cody hadn't quite grasped the situation so there weren't many things he could talk about. Harold was sentenced to decapitation, that was the truth, but Erica was his fiancée and she was still a child, so he was extremely troubled over whether he ought tell her or not.

In the mean time, since she was a guest, he led Erica to the same guest room as the day before. Upon entering inside, her female attendant took position in a corner of the room without uttering a word.

And sitting face to face with Erica, Cody immediately cut to the chase.

"How can I help you today.... you don't want to hear that, do you?"

"Yes. I'd like you to tell me what about Harold-sama's situation and the tribunal's decision"

".....Frankly speaking, his situation is very bad. Do you still want to hear?"

"Yes, if you please"

Erica answered without a tinge of hesitation. She had assumed the worst. An amazing reaction for a girl her age.

"First of all, it's no lie that he was sentenced to decapitation. If nothing's done, in six days, Harold will be executed."

With Cody's words, Erica closed her eyelids to gather her senses and she let out a light breath.

Next, she calmly opened her eyes, and looked straight at Cody.

"..... "If nothing's done, you said, does that mean there is something we can do about it?"

The girl facing Cody had kept her calm and read through the real meaning hidden behind his words.

As expected of Harold's fiancée, she's quite direct, he thought.

"Sorry for raising your expectations but I can't definitively say that there is. It's a very bad gamble."

"It doesn't matter as long as there is even just a glimmer of hope of saving Harold-sama."

She didn't understand the desperate circumstances but that didn't mean she didn't accept them. Even after taking on all the facts, she didn't waver and she only thought about saving Harold.

Cody searched for presences in the surroundings to confirm that nobody was listening in.

It should be all right to tell her.

"Normally, it would be impossible to overturn the tribunal's decision. But this time's deliberation is far from being normal."

Cody told Erica the details of the matter without concealing anything.

He told her about how the judgement was too rushed. About how Harold's words and actions had been completely ignored while, on the contrary, the execution had been pushed forward.

Listening to that, the faces of Erica and her attendant gradually became stiff.

"..... This is the situation Harold has been put in. There is definitely someone who's trying to kill Harold."(*Cody*)

"Who is it?"(*Erica*)

"Sorry to say but..."(*Cody*)

Cody shook his head left and right looking desperate.
He was ashamed to admit it, but he really had no idea who it was.

"But we need to search for that person using the time we have left. However, even if we manage to find them, there is no guarantee that it will save Harold."

If he had to be frank, they were actually in a state of checkmate. It was close to impossible to turn the tide at this point.
But perhaps because she didn't know that, Erica did not give in to the sorrow and despair.

"In that case, we need to start moving immediately. Cody-sama, who were the ones who held the discussions?"

"Huh? Well, if I'm not mistaken there were six members of the tribunal, adding to that was the commander of the knight order, the vice-commander, and the commanding officer of the expeditionary units. Among them, only the vice-commander opposed the execution."

The odd number of members of the deliberation were to be gathered for multiple discussions to then make a vote. Nine people is the maximum number of members per discussion.
A sentence being given after only two weeks for such a serious deliberation was abnormal.

"And what's your standpoint, Cody-sama?"

"To be honest, it's in my principles to bet on the winning horse. But this time only I'm ready to aid a losing battle."

Cody smiled wryly in embarrassment. Seeing that, Erica displayed a light smile.

Has she gained some faith in me? He wondered.

"Well then, would you please hand me a list of those who agreed with the execution? It's enough if you give me their names, their posts and their careers."

"I can prepare that but...."

"Then please do. Yuno, go prepare the boat for boarding. I'll catch up afterwards."

Erica gave her instructions without hesitation. Her attendant bowed her head and hurriedly left.

As for Cody, he told Erika to "Please wait a moment" and went back to his room. There, was a pile of documents among which was a list of the court's judges. He went back to the guest room and handed it to Erica.

"There you go. So, what are you planning to do?"

"...I'm ashamed to say it but I don't have the power to change the situation. I'll deliver this list to my father and I'll have him appeal for a withdrawal of the judgement and a retrial."

The current head of the Sumeragi family, Tasuku Sumeragi. Even among the people of the Royal capital, there are many who know the name. His influence is not to be compared to that of an average noble.

If the Sumeragi family raises its voice loud enough, other nobles will follow suit. And to the question of whether that would be enough to overturn the judgement, the answer is no.

"Also, in parallel to that, we'll do a background check on the members of the discussions. We have no other choice than to investigate as much as possible about who they had contact with before the verdict was given. The time will not be enough to trace back to the source of the bad rumors..."

"Leave that part to me. Some stories are only caught by the citizens' own information network. Even though I might not look the part, I have quite a lot of influence among the town's people."

Usually, during his daily patrols, when he skipped on his work during what he titled as breaks, he would stop by various shops to get some favors. Thanks to that, though he was never spoken well of, Cody had vast connections with the citizens of the king capital when compared to the other knights.

"The vice-commander Vincent will investigate the Commander. It's fine to leave it to him, he can do it."

If they left it to Vincent, then he'd somehow manage to obtain some

information. Cody trusted that.

Having likely perceived his trust, Erica also approved.

"So, Vincent will be responsible for the commander, and I'll investigate on the troops' commanding officer and the source of the bad rumors."

"The Sumeragi house will put its whole into investigating and persuading the remaining members of the deliberations."

At last, they had established each other's roles. Though they had included Vincent who was not present, Cody deemed it wouldn't be a problem as long as he got his ex-post-facto approval.

In any case, the Rescue Harold Alliance had just been formed. And they weren't likely to get any sleep for the coming week.

"Well then, I must get going. Thanks a lot for your cooperation, Cody-sama"

"Ah, hold on"

Unable to control his impetuous mood, Cody called Erica to a halt. Perhaps he was meddling in things that were none of his business, but this alone he wanted to do.

"It would be too much to tell you to not be impatient, but still, don't be afraid. Even if things are still hopeless by the end, I'll just have to barge into the tribunal to save him, I'll attract the attention of those who have some leeway and sharpen their views." *(Tln: Not sure about the last part)*

"If you do such a thing, won't you be removed from the knight order, Cody-sama?"

"If that happens, please employ me at the Sumeragi house. I am fairly confident in my sword skills so I'll be quite useful"

"Hehe, is that so? If that time does come, I'll discuss it with my father."

She leaked a smile that would enchant any observer regardless of age or gender. Cody might have managed to relax Erica's tension ever so slightly. When she was told about Harold's situation, only her face was calm, her hands were tightened to the point of turning white. She felt utterly despaired and afraid of losing Harold.

Her shoulders were faintly shaking, as well.

It felt like she was going to madly rush ahead with her eyes closed in order to shake off her fear of attacking.

However, to save Harold, she had to stay calm.

The escape routes were too narrow and unreliable. Entrusting this to brute force would not cut it.

"Please hold on to these emotions"

"Yes. Thank you"

With a slow bow, Erica withdrew from the guest room. This time, she had left for good.

"...She's a strong kid."

Cody spontaneously let out those words in the room where he was left by himself.

it wasn't an external kind of strength like the ability to fight, rather, it was the internal strength of a solid heart that goes through one's soul.

One could only wonder how much care she had for Harold, and yet she tried to keep calm even when a person that dear to her fell in such an awful predicament. Or perhaps it was precisely because he was in such a predicament.

It was hard to grasp for Cody.

For Harold's sake and Erica's, he would absolutely free him. Such a thought boiled up in him. And if that meant he would be banned from the knight order, then it was all the better.

There was something resounding in his heart, telling him to confront the cruel reality without backing away.

"Well, helping children who try their best is what adults are for"

Could that be what being a parent felt like? Suddenly having such reflections, Cody had goosebumps.

Chapter 51

From such a trifling matter, Cody had just realized he was getting old, but he didn't have the time to dwell on it.

After seeing Erica off, he immediately started making his moves.

What came first was contacting the commanding officer of the expeditionary units, Finnegan. Unfortunately, he wasn't well acquainted with the man who once was his company commander.

Therefore, Cody shifted through his relationships looking for a common friend between the commanding officer and himself, which made him think of Walsh, an acquaintance of Finnegan who held a position of equal standing as that of a company commander. He decided to ask for his help.

He didn't make any grand request of him. Walsh was just asked to invite Finnegan to go to Cody's usual bar on that evening.

Although Walsh had some doubts and specified that Cody would have to pay the whole bill as a condition, he accepted without prying too deeply. Perhaps he trusted Cody's character.

In the mean time, Cody, who had cut a deal, immediately readied himself to make his next move before the appointed time, but he was called to a halt.

"C, captain Cody...."

The three who stopped him were Robinson, Sid and Ellen. They were wearing thoughtful expressions, unfit of their usually lively selves.

He had roughly guessed their purpose, but he still took it upon himself to ask.

"Hmm? What do you want?"

"...is it true that Harold is going to be executed?"

Said Sid nervously. And Cody confirmed his worries.

"It seems like it."

".....—!"

The three gasped together.

It might have been for a short time but they had belonged to the same unit, therefore they were likely to have some thoughts on the situation. If it was only about Harold getting executed, they would probably have voiced their opposition loud and clear.

However, they had seen him. They had seen him turn the major-general into a slab of meat while his own body was covered in wounds, and they had seen the cold-blooded eyes that he would turn at his enemies.

A pair of eyes filled with pure killing intent the likes of which even Cody had hardly ever seen. Being affected by that, and memorizing the fear it had brought was unavoidable.

Especially for Robinson and the other two, who didn't have much experience in actual combat.

"... I don't want Harold to die. But I just can't forget the scene from that day..."

"The one we saw at that time was not the Harold that we know...."

"Tell us Captain, which one is the true Harold?"

The three didn't know how to face him.

The usual Harold, and the Harold from the Vertice forest. Having faced the two versions, they couldn't be blamed for being confused.

"What? How would I know?"

However, that was Cody's reply.

His answer was so casual that it threw off the three, leaving them with their eyes wide open, unable to add another word.

Cody continued his words to instruct them.

"As if you could guess what Harold is like after knowing him for no more than a few months. That's quite superficial of you, isn't it?"

Perhaps his claim was too blunt and perfunctory.

But his eyes were serious.

"So, you can only judge him based on what you've personally felt and seen. If I told you to give up on Harold's life, would you consent to the execution? And would you stay true to that choice to the very end even when you're asked for

help as sparks of fire fall on his body?"

Whether they resign to the judgement or they oppose it, if they make that choice under the influence of other people's words, there will be a time when they'll regret it.

Robinson and the others are knights, before all else. They need to carry out their own justice.

"So, what will you do? And remember, the criteria here is whether having faith in Harold will allow you to have faith in yourselves or not, alright?"

While the three found themselves unable to say anything, Cody saw his chance to take his leave.

There were no lies in the words he had just offered them. Sparing the ones who were not resolute enough from getting involved was his own peculiar way of being considerate.

Whether or not that was carried across to them however was not certain.

Well, it's probably fine, Cody told himself as he switched his mood. Sometimes you just have to get involved.

Having parted ways with Robinson and the others, Cody headed to his usual bar where Walsh and Finnegan were supposed to visit. He asked the shopkeeper there if he didn't mind cooperating with something.

It wasn't anything especially difficult. He just wanted an opportunity to spill a drug in a drink of his own choice. Of course, he wasn't going to make someone drink poison or some other dangerous thing.

It was a medicine that had some slight traits of a truth serum, with no negative effects on the body. By nature its effects are weak, but it's intended for making someone spill information after getting them drunk.

However, although the one asking was his good friend Cody, the storekeeper did not bend easily, which was a matter of course since the request's contents were utterly suspicious. Cody told him it was for a top secret internal investigation that had to be done through forcible means. In the end, the shopkeeper was coaxed by Cody's eloquence.

Afterwards, putting on a show of patrolling the town, he paid visits to people who were well informed about the local rumors and people who had

intelligence networks in the king's capital. He asked them about any substantial information they might have had, like if anything unusual had happened in the surroundings of those who had participated in determining Harold's punishment.

Meanwhile, the sun had made way for the moon.

Cody temporarily returned to the troops' barracks. He threw away his conspicuous armor, switching it with plain garments more fit of the streets, and he headed to the bar once again. He sat down on a suitable seat and awaited the arrival of Walsh and his friend.

After that, within less than 30 minutes, Cody's expected visitors showed up. Their eyes only met for a moment but it was enough for Walsh to make an overall guess as he lead Finnegan to sit back to back with Cody. That way, he was able hear their conversation.

Well, though he strained his ears to listen, at first they just kept on rambling. It's been a while since we he last had a drink together. The wife won't stop nagging me lately. Don't you have children yet? You should hurry and get married already. And so on.

However, the calm atmosphere was inversely proportional to Finnegan's drinking pace. Perhaps he had some pent-up anger to release.

An hour after they started drinking, Finnegan's articulation started turning clumsy.

Seeing his chance to act, Cody parted from his seat and invited Walsh to follow him to the counter with a hand sign. There, he whispered to him while including the shopkeeper to the conversation.

"Alright, he should be drunk enough, let's start the plan."

"Hold on. What plan?"

Walsh, who was only told to invite Finnegan there for a drink, promptly interjected. He was seriously lacking explanations.

"Well, it's nothing difficult. I just want you to ask him a question — and make him drink this"

Cody unwrapped a paper he took from his breast pocket and stealthily dropped some white powder inside an ale that the shopkeeper had put on the

counter.

The powder melted without a sound.

Walsh seemed to understand what it was.

"Hey wait, that's...."(Walsh)

"Could you keep that to yourself and have him drink this? Oh, also, please clear out the room"(Cody)

"Good grief"(shopkeeper)

While sighing, the shopkeeper left the counter and went from seat to seat to inform the clients that he was closing up shop early.

Though it was going to affect the sales, he would make up for it later with the help of his colleagues and subordinates.

"So, what is it you want to know?"

"There is that one subordinate of mine who is likely going to have his head sliced off because of an inexplicable judgement. I want to learn the truth of the matter from the people who were involved in the deliberations."

"Even if you do that, you can't overrule the decision of the council."

"I'm well aware of that. It's just some useless resistance on my part."

If this didn't go well, he would have to seriously consider joining Erica, as she had half-jokingly suggested to him.

He wanted to help Harold, no matter what it entailed, Cody's intentions were that genuine. Having felt that, Walsh did not attempt to stop him.

"But you could end up in some serious trouble, too. If you overlook this situation, you might get caught, you know? Don't you mind that?"(Cody)

"Hah..... shut the hell up and mind your own business, will you? I just have to ask him about that deliberation, is that it?"

"Oh man, a friend in need is a friend indeed, am I right?"

"Maybe I should go home after all"

"Wait, I was just kidding!"

For Cody, getting Walsh's cooperation was the ideal scenario.

And so, Cody told Walsh which questions he wanted him to ask. While they held that conversation, Cody and the others soon became the only four people left in the shop. But in his drunkenness, Finnegan did not seem to be aware of his surroundings as he inclined his glass little by little. The preparations for the interrogation were complete. Walsh, who had received the ale mixed with the medicine, placed it in front of Finnegan.

"There you go"

"...Thank you"

Finnegan sluggishly turned his eyes to the drink and tasted it without an ounce of suspicion. He drank a third in a single gulp. Then, after waiting long enough for the medicine to start taking effect, Walsh asked him.

"That thing the other day was really terrible."

".....terrible?"

"You were commander of the expedition, right? Who could have seen that coming"

"That thing...."

He muttered, feeling terribly dispirited. He did not want to recall the events of the Vertice forest which had brought so many casualties. But even though Finnegan was slow of speech, Walsh had to strike while the iron was hot as the liquor and medicine were taking effect. It was too good of an opportunity to pass on.

"It seems like one of those recruits is going to receive the capital punishment for treason, but, what did the guy do?"(*Walsh*)

"I haven't actually seen it, but in the report it's said that he ignored his superior's orders and escaped in front of the enemy. He's also suspected of being a spy for wearing a military uniform from the empire."(*Walsh*)

"Hmm. Well, disobeying the superior's orders and running from the enemy is not unusual for new recruits, so it must be the spy charges. I'm pretty sure

that's what lead to the decision of giving him the capital punishment"(Walsh)

"No....."(Finnegan)

While Finnegan was completely lost about what to answer, his eyes gradually turned blank under the effect of the medicine.

"No we didn't decide that... But that person said Harold was dangerous. Therefore, so that he wouldn't kill my wife, for Cynthia's life...."

It wasn't just the alcohol speaking.
Finnegan's tone became uncertain.

"Who said it? Dangerous in what way? That has nothing to do with you wife, right?"(Walsh)

"...ah yes, it's not related to her... But still, it's no good. Harold being alive is no good. I could have opposed the judgement, but my child will soon be born..... So, I had to...."

Finnegan's state rapidly turned odd. His words were incoherent, and his atmosphere was strange overall.

Had the medicine worked too well? As Walsh wondered that, Finnegan suddenly stood up. The chair he was sitting on fell backwards from the power of his brusque move.

And then——

".....ah, aaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! AAAAAH!"

Bizarre. As he let out a voice that could only be described as such, Finnegan started running. He ran up to one of the shop's supporting pillars, grabbed the massive log with both of his hands and began striking his head on it.

As he raised his strange voice as loud as he could, he kept striking again and again until blood started streaming down from his forehead.

Thereupon, Cody and Walsh finally came back to their senses and went to stop the sudden act of violence.

"Hey wait...!"

"What are you doing?!"

The duo pulled him from both sides to stop him from injuring himself. Even so,

Finnegan was violently swinging his head left and right as he continued letting out that bizarre voice.

Despite being restrained by two strong men like Cody and Walsh, he kept resisting for more than five minutes.

However, that resistance suddenly ended. And Finnegan abruptly lost consciousness.

Cody put the exhausted body face up and hurriedly checked his pulse and breathing.

"...He's alive"

The three let out deep sighs of relief.

For the time being, they had to treat his wounds, so Cody instructed the shopkeeper to fetch some cloths and bandages in the shop. Nobody there could use healing magic.

In any case, he wouldn't be able to hear him out today. Though his injury itself seemed pretty light, they didn't know about the insides of his head, so he had to be hospitalized for several days.

The shopkeeper had gone out, and for a short while, no sound could be heard in the room. As if he couldn't bear this anymore, Walsh broke the silence.

"What just happened?"

"..... I don't know. All I can tell is that it can't really be justified by the medicine's effects."

There was no illusion or confusion factor in the medicine he made Finnegan drink. And drinking it with sake was fine as well.

"The Finnegan from earlier was nothing like his usual self..."

"I know right? It's as if he was "possessed by a demon."

A demon. It was his frank opinion regarding Finnegan's actions. However, those words he so casually spoke, gave Cody a very bad feeling.

Chapter 52

(Elu's Pov)

"..... and that's apparently what happened"

"That's scary! What the hell?!"

Lifa, having heard Elu's story, was trembling while holding her shoulders with both of her hands. It was scary indeed.

But that was the very reason Lifa wanted to hear it.

The bits and pieces of the circumstances surrounding Harold had a strong impression on her. She was brimming with curiosity.

"What happened next?!"

Elu had met his goal. He had managed to catch her interest.

"It should be enough for today. If you don't sleep soon, you'll doze off in the middle of the night watch."

"Er...."

"Besides, tomorrow we're going to go up the mountain and fight against monsters, right? We have to rest properly."

"I know, I know....."

Saying so while somewhat sulky, Lifa lied down and rolled over. Before long, she fell asleep and started breathing peacefully.

That has already been said before but, Elu still hadn't revealed his gender to Lifa. And regardless of him/her being a man or woman, she should at least have felt slightly vulnerable being next to a complete stranger.

Despite that, the sun still came up the next morning.

Maybe from how effective the story from the night before was on her, Lifa was fidgeting as she kept repeatedly looking at Harold to then avert her eyes. She was extremely restless. Perhaps her curiosity and self-discipline were conflicting.

Harold was aware of that but he silently proceeded ahead.

His destination appeared to be the top. The hydras were in the summit's vicinity so there were no doubts in Harold's steps.

Most of the monsters that the three occasionally encountered were taken care of by Harold, who was walking in first position. He was doing well, but he wasn't one to chatter pointlessly so Lifa couldn't find a chance to talk to him. As for Elu, he was observing the two with interest, therefore no one in the group uttered a word.

Unable to bear the atmosphere and Lifa's glances, Harold suddenly stopped walking and looked behind him. Then, he had a word with Lifa.

"Hey"

"W, What...?"

"You've been a pain for quite a while now. If you have something to say, say it. If you don't, then stop stealing glances at me. It's annoying."

His manner of speaking was quite overbearing. An ordinary person would have been pressurized by that, but Lifa's reaction was the complete opposite. She went on to ask her question as if saying this was convenient for her. That's really something, thought Elu.

"Geez, I'll stop being a pain in your ass and just ask you then. Is it true you were almost executed?"

Harold's sharp eyes pierced into Elu. Lifa, who did not know Harold the day before, was now asking such a question. There was no need to ponder over who gave her the information.

".....How much did you hear?"

He didn't ask from who, but how much. He indirectly gave a positive answer with his question. At the same time, according to Elu's observations, the likelihood that some parts of the story were still kept secret had increased.

If Harold was just making an affirmation, there would hardly be any need for him to worry about how much Lifa knew. To put it another way, there was

something he didn't want to be known, or rather, that he wanted to hide. Harold's answer, while confirming how much Lifa heard, also served as a check on Elu who had shared the gossips with her. He wanted to ascertain whether he had hit on any inconvenient truths.

Seemingly unaware of those intentions, Lifa started telling the story she had heard from Elu in its entirety. Harold, who listened to her from beginning to end, looked displeased.

"— and that's about it."

"And it's basically what happened. Now that you know, you better stop with those annoying glances from here on out. Otherwise, I'll cut both of your tendons and leave you on the mountain by yourself."

"You have some frightening ideas...."

Having finished listening to her story, Harold gave Lifa a warning but he still confirmed her inquiry once again. Although she was likely not completely convinced, Lifa still withdrew regardless. She was thinking that, based on his wrongdoings which she learned of by hearsay, he might actually put his threats into action.

However, Elu was paying close attention to Harold and did not miss the moments where he slightly reacted. It happened twice. The first time was when Cody's name came up, the second time was from the words "test subject". Judging from that reaction, Harold had probably noticed a strange point in the story. Moreover, he just confirmed it without pointing that out. In that case, there was a chance that he would come in contact with Elu.

Elu was very much looking forward to how much information he could draw from Harold. He felt something close to the excitement of a treasure hunter finding himself in front of a treasure chest in a labyrinth. As Elu was getting excited within his innermost thoughts, Harold's steps did not slow down one bit. And then, around noon. The trio arrived at the peak of mount Giran.

"We've arrived!"

Lifa let out a delighted voice, as if she had forgotten her objective. Although the top of mount Giran had some noticeable rocky areas here and there, it was basically flat. The snow was scarce in the current season, but in winter all the rocks would be covered up. And, at the center of that flat summit, there was a crater of about 200 meters in diameter.

Disregarding Lifa who was savoring her accomplishment of reaching the top of a mountain, Harold approached the crater. Curious about what he was doing, Elu followed after him. As he looked into the crater, Harold located a place with a relatively gentle slope with many parts that could be used as footholds, and he jumped right down.

Harold descended in a steady rhythm. Though there was no danger of him falling into lava since this was a dormant volcano, he had gone down by a whole 100 meters, and in no time at all. Harold who had arrived at the bottom of the crater took out some machine-like object. It wasn't really clear because of the long viewing-distance, but he installed it in the middle of the crater. Having finished working after no more than a few minutes, Harold came back the same way he went in, with a light jump.

"What an amazing athletic ability. There is no way I could imitate this"

"Hmph, I wonder about that"

"So, what were you doing?"

"That's none of your business"

What a blunt reply. Well, I didn't expect him to talk easily. Maybe it's some sort of observation device from the research establishment that he belongs to, guessed Elu.

"By the way, you....."(Harold)

Harold's sharp eyes narrowed down even further. *Is he going to ask about that strange point?*

The moment Elu thought that, there was a scream that split the atmosphere

between the two. There was no time for their dialogue anymore.

They looked for Lifa and they found her at once. The problem was that she was facing a gigantic dragon wearing an armor made of ice.

That was a hydra.

Maybe because it had recognized her as an enemy, or maybe as a prey, the hydra was chasing Lifa. She very narrowly evaded it, and threw some test tubes at him, causing an explosion.

Though the attack had hit, it didn't seem to have dealt much damage. With the way things were proceeding, Lifa was going to be defeated.

When she accidentally looked at Harold, he was standing with his arms crossed. He seemed to be observing the battle between Lifa and the hydra.

"Aren't you going to help?"

"I never intended to lend her my power from the get go. I'll let her handle it herself 'till she reaches her limit."

"So cold"

From Elu's point of view, the hydra being brought down by Lifa's power alone was an unlikely scenario. Helping her was not a matter of if but when, and considering the danger Lifa was in, it would be wiser to help her immediately.

"..... There is no way she'd be at her wit's end against an opponent of this level."(*Harold*)

"What do you mean by that?"(*Elu*)

Asked Elu having heard Harold's mutter, but his answer was silence. He was watching Lifa's fight attentively.

Elu gave up on asking anything at the current time as it seemed useless and he turned his eyes back on Lifa's fight. For the time being, he prepared himself to assist her in case of an emergency.

While evading the hydra's claws and ice breath, she once again threw some test tubes at him. However, they didn't explode, there was just some transparent liquid that flowed from them, wetting the hydra's body.

Lifa repeated that action several times, and next she threw a test tube in the middle of the space between the dragon and herself. Thereupon, in the blink of

an eye, a white haze spread out.

It was likely a distraction to snatch away the dragon's field of vision. That was a skillful aim. Due to the thick mist, the hydra lost sight of Lifa and started going left and right in confusion.

Not missing that opportunity, Lifa took some distance to complete the magic-casting and shoot her spell.

"—— It's over...!『 Flame burst』!"

Balls of fire rained down on the hydra like meteors. The moment they hit it, a deafening noise and a large explosion occurred.

The blows' strength was different from the flame burst that Elu knew. Certainly, the spell consisted of innumerable fireballs pouring down like rain to then explode at the end and swallow the opponent in flames.

However, it shouldn't have been that powerful. Just what on earth had Lifa done?

The flames rose up high. Lifa, the one responsible for that, was gasping for breath while watching the insides of the flames intently.

The shadow of the hydra was lying down on the ground. He was likely dealt some considerable damage this time.

However, with a twitch, said shadow started moving. The hydra stood up with its neck up high, and it roared at the clear sky.

"No way... this wasn't enough to defeat it...?"

Lifa's voice was filled with despair. Despite her facing the dragon with her full power, it didn't go down.

There was no mistaking it, this was her limit.

The dragon spread its wings and flew to the sky. Its body that appeared from the flames was filled with many wounds that were anything but light.

However, the hydra still had the intention and the power to fight.

The hydra steadily rose up. As Lifa thought it was going to escape, the dragon suddenly turned its gigantic body over.

It proceeded to free-fall vertically from the sky. As he fell down, he obtained propulsive power from its wings and accelerated.

Naturally, its target was Lifa, and with her having run out of power, she could

not deal with that attack.

Being hit directly meant death. Even if she was grazed she wouldn't go unscathed.

That kind of attack that could be called a certain killing blow was intercepted with a heavy sound of clashing metal.

The hydra that was falling at a considerable speed was flipped over and sent tumbling while scrapping off one of the summits rocky areas.

Lifa, of course, and even Elu, who was far away, were completely bewildered. No, it can be said that it's precisely because he was far away from the action and was watching seriously that he couldn't believe what was happening.

The large body of the hydra that attacked from the sky weighted easily over 1 ton. And Harold knocked that down with only two swords.

Fatigue, fear, surprise. From all of those, Lifa lost her strength and fell down on the spot.

"...Such a pain."

Harold said to himself. Following his line of sight, there was another hydra heading towards his position.

Perhaps it had used its roar to call its comrades.

Thinking normally, the situation was too critical. Still, Harold didn't have the slightest intention of escaping.

In his right hand, he held a long broadsword. A blue stream ran through its heavy dark-gray blade, a jade green crystal was embedded at the base of the sword, and its hand-guard was shaped like a burning flame.

As for his left hand, it was holding a thin black sword. It was well suited for Harold in that it had no useless decorations, which made it feel all the more sharp.

With the sword in his right hand being supported by his shoulder, and the sword in his left hand hanging low, Harold caught both of the hydras in his sight, the one who was raising its body while roaring, and the one who was coming over from the sky.

Before long, those two were standing in line. They let out an intimidating air that would make one think they'd have to lay down their lives to challenge

them to a fight.

Harold addressed those very same ice dragons.

"The only thing waiting for you is death. Be obedient and let yourself be killed without resistance."

He was talking to monsters. The chances were that they wouldn't understand his words.

Still, the hydras were angry. Maybe it was because of the wounds, maybe it was because their territory was invaded.

But their anger did not last long.

They felt a sword flash. They couldn't actually see it, but they were proven right within a moment.

But the neck of the wounded hydra had already dropped down. It was too quick, without any resistance.

Like a toy broken by a child.

As Harold stood on the back of its companion whose cut neck was now spurting out dark red blood, the other hydra shot his ice breath at him. Shot by an attack that would freeze a person in the blink of an eye, Harold's figure disappeared for a second. And then, a shout rose.

The dragon's right eye had been sliced right off.

When did that happen? There was no time to think about it. Next, the dragon's three left claws were all cut off together.

Unable to resist, the hydra opened its wings trying to escape from the sky and flew off for a few meters, but then, its wing's patagium was sliced and the beast fell back to the ground.

Harold did not stop. He continued attacking again and again, left and right, leaving only his afterimages behind.

This could no longer be called a fight. It was the brutal deed of an overwhelmingly strong man bullying a weak individual.

Even though he had secured a field of vision which allowed him to overlook the whole situation, Elu's eyes could not catch up to Harold's speed. The nearby hydra was getting wounded, overwhelmed by sword attacks, as it most likely couldn't figure out what was what anymore.

This was Harold Stokes.

Was he a bad boy? Was he a knight killer? Was he the youngest genius in history to join the knight order?

He wasn't a being that could be described with such words.

With a splash, something stuck to his cheek. And Elu suddenly came back to his senses.

He wiped that with his right hand, and it turned out to be the hydra's blood. That very hand was slightly trembling.

So far, Elu had seen many people who were referred to as strong. He had heard exaggerated anecdotes in various places about strong men who accomplished prowesses beyond anyone's expectations.

However, they were thoroughly overshadowed by him, his power couldn't be put in the same category as a human's strength. He was like a calamity that spread death.

At this moment, what Elu and surely Lifa as well felt towards Harold, was fear.

Chapter 53

(Elu's Pov)

Two hydras were just killed in an instant. Witnessing such an unbelievable scene, Elu and Lifa could not let out a word.

However, Harold himself did not seem to feel any fear, excitement or fatigue from the combat. Wearing his usual cold expression, he asked Lifa.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh-?"

"Aren't you going to collect samples from the hydra? I think that corpse is the most suitable."

"—— Oh that's right!"

Harold's words startled Lifa for a moment, but the next instant she stood up energetically and turned towards the hydra's corpse, rolling up her sleeves. Perhaps she had a fast recovery, or perhaps this was the work of her unfaltering courage.

Not too far away from them, Elu somehow managed to stop trembling. Before he could understand what was happening, Elu had instinctively been driven into a state of fear.

He had a very hard time suppressing this.

"I had heard the rumors but to think they were true, that strength is really something. I'm impressed."

Pretending to be calm, he called out to Harold.
In response, Harold's expression turned to contempt.

"The hell are you saying? As if the information you bastards caught would be lacking credibility."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Elu transparently feigned ignorance. He was just interested in Harold's motives.

From the information he had shared, it was clear that he was well informed on Harold's circumstances. He wasn't likely to think of Elu as some poor traveler. Therefore, to probe Harold's claim, Elu dared to evade his words. Harold's next words were enough to catch even Elu by surprise.

"Cut the crap, Giffelt."

Harold casually revealed Elu's true identity as if it were no big deal. Elu had never given him that name. And he had never given Harold any information that would allow him to assert this. Although Elu thought he was just shooting in the dark, Harold seemed to be confident.

"..... Giffelt? How could a kid like me be such an important person?"

"Giffelt is the family name that you and your people use. And you're qualified to be referred to as a member of the Giffelt family. Am I wrong?"

An even bigger shock than the one before rocked Elu. Harold's words had hit the bull's-eye.

Giffelt was not an individual name but a clan name. Be it men, women, children, adults or the elderly, anyone could use the name as long as they belonged to the clan.

They all dealt in the information business and shared their intelligence within the family. By doing so, they made up the fictional but certainly real image of the information dealer, Giffelt.

The Giffelt family had handed down a law to keep their existence hidden. It could be said to be their most important secret.

Why does he know ? Even if he's acquainted with another Giffelt, I don't think they would disclose this information.

However, Elu knew that absolutes did not exist. It was a fact that Harold knew about this, so there had to be a leak.

"Well, that doesn't really matter. Rather, how much do you bastards know about me?"(Harold)

Harold continued talking as if he considered the Giffelt family's secret to be no more important than any other story, but Elu certainly didn't perceive it that

way. Harold had grasped the clan's secret and could deal with it however he deemed fit.

It was an awfully vicious threat. If Elu lied in this situation, what would happen when he was found out ? Elu couldn't help but expect the worst case scenario.

"Would you believe it if I said I told Lifa everything?"

"Absolutely not."

Harold immediately declared it.

That was to be expected. Elu had shared suspicions of the Tribunal's deliberation with Lifa, to tempt Harold to investigate the story, but still, the false facts she was told were based on truths. And it was still a lie in the end. The kingdom's Tribunal held the position of a high-order state agency. Normally, even if a prestigious noble family raised their voice, a judgement would never be overruled.

And, for one who researched what happened behind the scenes beforehand, it was clear just how strange that particular deliberation was.

However, if Elu had stopped there, perhaps Harold wouldn't even have bothered. The words 'test subject' were definitely the reason for his interest. Based on the official cover-up story, Harold was supposed to have escaped his execution by cooperating in a certain study. He could play an important part in one of the kingdom's projects and claim the position of 'servant' to atone for his crimes.

(Maybe I rushed things a little....)

Anticipating the words 'test subject' would shake Harold, Elu had primed Lifa to speak them instead. And that would mean Elu's theory was not far from the truth.

As a result, a counter-attack had blindsided him.

But, Elu reconsidered, while the clan's secret being found out was certainly threatening, Harold had given away his advantage. Elu could have been embroiled in a hopeless predicament someday without that knowledge. Now he had a chance to avoid that future.

"I won't ask again. You better hurry and answer."

Pressed for an answer, Elu steeled himself.

How much did he know about Harold ? The question was a little vague but Elu had an idea which answer he was seeking.

Harold was likely asking him if he knew why he was called a test subject..

And indeed, Elu knew.

The information he had was unbelievable, but he was convinced it was the truth after bearing witness to Harold's strength.

Would Harold kill Elu for knowing? It wouldn't be strange if he did.

But he probably wouldn't act rashly since he understood the group structure of the Giffelt clan.

Even if that information was important enough that Harold had to silence whoever had it, the one who had it was Elu, a Giffelt. Once it had spread among the clan, there was no stopping it.

They were both holding bombs. But they could finish things smoothly as long as neither one tossed them into the public.

".....Looks like I can no longer hide it. I'm concerned because I've stumbled upon some quite troublesome facts concerning you and at I'm at a loss on how to handle them."

Come on, think about it Harold, thought Elu, carefully putting words together. Harold absolutely had to believe there would be little meaning to killing Elu. And he had to consider the risks it entailed.

"I mean, you've obtained this powerful strength by cutting down your own life after all. It could be dangerous to mishandle information about such an inhumane weapon being developed."



(Harold's Pov)

In this world, Harold's game knowledge was an overwhelming advantage. It gave him the upper hand in most situations.

Although he had met with many unexpected events, it was thanks to this gift that he had somehow managed to break his death flags.

However, there were two characters that he still feared despite having such

an unfair technique.

The first was the genius mad scientist, Justus Freund, the last boss of 『Brave Hearts』.

And the other was the information dealer, Giffelt, with access to the meta-knowledge of the game.

He was especially concerned about the unknown numbers of Giffelts. Was the information held by the Giffelt clan limited to the scope of this world, or were they able to overlook the world from a higher ground like in the game? He didn't know if they were friends or foes, but there was a risk they would expose many of his secrets.

While having them as friends would be reassuring, he still believed he should be cautious when contacting them.

The current situation was the unexpected fruit of Giffelt asking to accompany Harold for some reason while he was carrying out a mission for Justus. And if he had to be honest, had he met Giffelt by himself, he might have refused, but Harold also had to act as a cushion for Lifa, and he wanted to know how strong she was at this point in time.

Going from there, Harold kept an eye on Giffelt with the ulterior motive of finding the right opportunity.

And just now, Giffelt spoke some decisive words. He told Harold about his sword, the one with a crystal embedded in it and explained how it was developed by Justus, "the weapon that turns life force into mighty power." As Harold was shocked in his mind, he admired Giffelt even more.

(The name Giffelt isn't for show... to think they had gotten this far...)

That information could be said to be Justus' last line of defense, "We don't really need the weapon, but let's do this just in case." It was a lie Justus used to deceive the country's higher-ups so that he could freely move Harold. Its purpose was to make it look like Harold was just compensating the country for the withdrawal of his execution by participating in the research despite it cutting his own life.

However, Justus couldn't officially announce a deal that allowed him to fiddle

with a person's life, even if said person was a criminal, so only a handful of people were told the truth.

But still, the Giffelts could be said to be quite the special group of information dealers, and seeing how they had the power to get information about national secrets, ones that concerned a weapon's development at that, their organization had surely reached a worldwide peak.

And, the most frightening part of that was that Justus had managed to pass under their radar. It would be considerably difficult to prevent such a man from becoming aware of a revolt once it was put into action.

However, Harold had assumed that from the beginning. And he wasn't over-confident enough to cross Justus alone.

As things were, it was difficult for Harold to move freely outside of Justus' directives.

That's where his collaborators would usually come into play. And with Giffelt's information network, he could move them more efficiently. He wanted the clan to join his side by any means.

"...I see. So you're in that deep, huh."

Said Harold solemnly, seeming really serious. Faced with such an atmosphere, it felt like Giffelt— Elu's face turned blue.

Though Giffelt wasn't the expressive type in the game, this was convenient for Harold who could now read him ever so slightly.

"You've obtained information that only a select few are allowed to know in this country. I can't ignore that."

".... Then, are you going to kill me?"

"Well, that would be the quickest solution."

Elu couldn't breathe. His face turned even bluer.

"However, I'm not planning to do anything that foolish. It's not even worth considering."

"Huh?"

"You have some quite convenient abilities. Why not work for me and put your

talents to use?"

"...Could it be that you're recruiting me?"

"Did you not hear what I just said? Are you deaf?"

"What you're saying is, if I refuse you'll kill me, or, or....."

Elu murmured a line that Harold couldn't ignore. Even if he refused, Harold had no intention to kill him at all.

Certainly his phrasing could be interpreted that way, but he didn't want to force Elu's hand using such an extreme method of stress interview and make his impression even worse than it already was.

"It doesn't matter to me whether you live or die, bastard. If you want to refuse, suit yourself."

"... Ooh. If that's true, then does that mean there are no risks for me if I refuse?"

"No, that's not it. There is indeed a risk that you can't overlook if you decline."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"Then, I'll explain. Don't you seek the『Star memory』?"

Elu's facial expression crumbled like never before.

It showed astonishment and doubt. It was hard to describe, a sort of mix between various emotions.

"H, how would you know about that.. don't tell me you...?"

"I have no obligation to tell you."

He couldn't tell Elu that he had knowledge from the game. However, judging from his reaction, the Giffelts weren't cheat beings who held information about the world's meta.

Therefore it would be slightly easier for Harold to make contact.

"So, what will you do? Will you take one step closer to the Giffelts' dream? Or will you let that opportunity fly over your head?"

"... I don't know, it's way too suspicious. I can't believe this because it's simply impossible..... But it's certainly true that we're seeking that thing, no matter the

cost."

"Then, come confirm my words with your own eyes. There is no n o trust involved in this process."

In the first place, as long as he proceeded as he did in the game's story, Elu would manage to obtain the『Star memory』for sure. Harold was just bluffing. Elu, who did not know that, agreed to Harold's negotiations after a short silence. He knelt on one knee and bowed his head.

"I'll entrust you with my... No, Giffelt's power. Please use it as you see fit, Harold-sama."

"The only thing I want from you is results, not good attitude."

Said Harold, with his usual arrogance, looking down on Elu kneeling respectfully before him. But in his mind, Harold was delighted. Giffelt had joined his side. If he combined that with his game knowledge, he just might be able to outsmart Justus. There were several months left until the game's story began. And the foundations of his counteroffensive were steadily building.

Chapter 54

"Wait! What are you doing to Elu?!"

A voice forced itself in between Elu and Harold.

Lifa, who had finished collecting the Hydra samples, dashed towards them in her white coat covered with red spots. In her eyes, Harold appeared to be bullying Elu.

With just his right hand, Harold restrained her by grabbing her small head in what's commonly referred to as an Iron Claw.

"Nyaah !?"

Lifa let out a strange voice, surprised from the sudden shock and pain. The sight of a bloodstained person savagely approaching him roused Harold's revulsion.

Though he wasn't one to talk as he was covered in hydra blood.

As Lifa wriggled in resistance, Harold figured he couldn't keep this going forever and reluctantly released his grip.

Lifa, now released from the iron claw, took some distance and threatened him. Just like a cat.

Removing his eyes from her, Harold turned off his "Switch." His excitement from the battle slowly died down.

Harold called it a Switch for convenience's sake, but in reality it was simply a method he had worked out to shift his consciousness to make use of the original Harold's power.

However, that didn't mean Kazuki Hirasawa's consciousness was cut off. It was a kind of mind control technique which pushed forward the awareness of the original Harold... or so he had perceived, but he didn't really understand the theory behind it.

Based on his experiences in this world, he believed that the original Harold was sleeping in his body or his mind, but this was just Harold's conjecture.

So he had started suspecting the circumstances that were forced onto him.

Who was it that would take control of his body to say and do things he hadn't intended?

And the time he fought against Ritzert, where did the killing intent that poured from the depths of his mind come from?

The conclusion Harold had reached by joining the pieces together was "The Original Harold is within me."

To verify his hypothesis, Harold had tried various methods on countless occasions. At times, he'd put his life on the line on dangerous battlefields in order to free himself from obstructive thoughts and turn off his consciousness.

He would inevitably need this sooner or later to draw that power out during the game's battle events.

As a result, Harold managed to acquire a new skill, "Switch." He didn't know if that was proof that his hypothesis was right or that he had improved his mind control.

What was clear, however, was that the Switch skill buried his fear with battle instincts and considerably improved his combat capabilities. Even in life and death battles, he didn't even flinch.

His body and skills were beyond what Harold's were in the game. He was very familiar with his custom fighting style and he now had the battle instincts of the original Harold.

Speaking only of strength, the switched Harold was close to being the best Harold Stokes he could possibly wish to be.

If he had to name a consequence of using the Switch, it would be that his harsh words and complaints would become even harsher than usual. In his switched state, Harold's way of speaking was basically the same as the Harold from the game, so he preferred to keep to himself while switched.

"Calm down, Lifa. He didn't do anything to me."

Elu calmly addressed Lifa who hadn't dropped her threatening stance.

"Then, then why are you kneeling?!"

"Oh, that's because I've become his— Harold-sama's subordinate."

"Huh...?"

From Elu's words, Lifa let out a flat voice. Harold was in a similar state of mind.

Elu said that he had become Harold's subordinate, which explained why he kneeled.

That seemed to make perfect sense. However, Harold's intention had been to reach a mutually beneficial relationship where he would cooperate with the Giffelt family's search for the 『Star Memory』in exchange for Elu's help.

Thinking back on their earlier exchange, Harold's words did make it seem like he would be playing first fiddle, though he didn't go as far as suggesting a master and subordinate relationship. Perhaps he had been more overbearing than usual because his Switch skill was turned on.

Though he had been too busy mentally celebrating, he should have at least felt a sense of incongruity when Elu attached "sama" to his name.

(Rather, why would Elu agree with that? He'd normally completely refuse becoming something like my subordinate or whatever, right?)

When he thought he had gotten an ally, he had actually obtained a subordinate.

By no means did he assume he would stand above the Giffelts. To begin with, he didn't even have confidence he could deal with Elu as one member of the clan.

"Don't go getting the wrong idea here. All I said is that you'd be working for me, bastard."

"This one understands he does not deserve your trust as of yet. This one shall prove himself worthy with his future actions."

Wrong. That was not what Harold wanted to say.

In addition to the honorifics that were never seen in the game, Elu wasn't even speaking to him in first person anymore. This was getting creepy, way too creepy.

"W-what do you mean by 'subordinate'? Don't tell me you were threatened to....!"

"Not at all. This is my own choice."

Though the now awakened Lifa cross-examined him in an attempt to figure out his true motives, Elu denied her question head-on. There was no mistaking Elu's words. Harold was guilty of nothing.

And at the same time, the question put some light on how Harold was perceived by Lifa.

At the first suspicion she had of him, her reaction was to threaten him. She must have thought that he really was scum.

Well, that probably meant the bad rumors about Harold had reached her, but Harold was sad because there was no real need for Lifa to hate him. Erica would probably tell her that he was a proper human being and clear up the misunderstanding once the two became friends later on, but still, he couldn't deny that it bothered him.

"If you want to earn my trust, start by changing that weird behavior of yours."

"Is it that bad? I was going for a loyal retainer-like mannerism."

"Yeah, it gives me the creeps."

"Well I guess I screwed up."

Hahaha, Elu laughed. And he easily turned back to his usual state. Perhaps he took on that mannerism to make fun of Harold. Or maybe he abased himself more than necessary for the sake of information on the Star Memory?

Harold wanted him to confirm whether he was joking or serious about being his subordinate, but he put that aside for the time being as his priority was to descend the mountain. The weather was fine but his body told him the temperature was quite low, probably under 5°C. (*Tln: Under 41 °F*)

And yet Lifa was wearing a miniskirt, and Elu was wearing nothing but thick overalls and a cotton wrap around his chest. *How are they not cold?* Well, in the original work, Erica easily climbed mountains wearing what looked like lacquered Geta shoes and a Hakama. And in general, the hero's party members were all dressed in thin clothes, so there was no point arguing about that. It was just another part of the game's settings.

"It would be a waste of time to stay here any longer than this. Let's hurry and

go back."

"Alright. By the way, Harold, are you going back to the royal capital after this?"

"That's right."

"The royal capital? It's been two years since I've last been there."

"What's your business with the royal capital, bastard?"

"Business? Well, I'm going to follow you there so..."

"What?"

Elu tried to naturally step in as Harold's travel buddy. Harold was about to reject him on the spot, but then stopped to think about it.

He had already been expelled from the knight order, so when he returned to the royal capital, he was going to stay in a room in the research center. And in that research center was Justus.

Could he obtain some information if he introduced Elu to him?

Thanks to his knowledge from the original work, Harold roughly knew what steps Justus would take and by what means he would take them. However, it was going to be difficult to crush Justus' project from its source if he didn't know the progress of his plans, and even if he did, there was a possibility that the world would deviate too much from the original work, rendering his greatest advantage, his knowledge about the game, completely useless. Therefore, Harold's imagination was constantly focused on counterattacking, and having rapid countermeasures against the events Justus brought about.

In practice, Liner and the others were the ones who would actually be on the move, but still, supporting them from behind the scenes was going to be a major objective for Harold. Hence why he was gathering upright people, and this time, he was fortunate and won over Elu.

Borrowing Elu's talents, he could probably figure out how far along Justus' plan was.

"We'll have plenty of chances to come in contact from now on so I also want to confirm the location of your dwelling."

"Humph. Have it your way."

Certainly, he had a point, they were going to meet pretty often. Besides, even if Elu met with Justus, Harold didn't need to worry about him revealing information by mistake or something.

What was worrisome, however, was how much Elu knew about him.

It seemed like he had grasped the series of events that happened to Harold from when he joined the knight order until the present time, but how about the things before that? Considering Giffelt's power, it wouldn't be surprising if they had thoroughly investigated Collet and the LP farming methods, but there was no proof of that.

And Harold didn't want to ask Elu not to speak of these things since it would be suspicious and could end up exposing him.

As Harold was thinking things through and nodding to himself, Lifa, who had been contemplating to herself en route, made an abrupt declaration.

"I'm coming along, too!"

Her remark was so baffling that time seemed to stop.

Harold and Elu were utterly lost about why she wanted to come.

"What a merry train of thought. You have way too many shortcomings, and you're too high maintenance."

"What? So it's fine for Elu but not me?"

Though his words had a sarcastic tone to them, he was telling the truth. If Lifa did not become Liner's comrade, the story wouldn't progress.

In this world that wasn't bound by the scenario, Lifa not meeting Liner was an option, but of course, that would lower the hero party's strength. Especially since she played a part in resolving the miasma outbreak in the Sumeragi territory.

If she came to his side, the damage would be impossible to predict. He wanted to avoid that.

"That's right. You're of no use to me."

"I didn't mean I'd become your subordinate. I'm worried about Elu so I'll follow you to the royal capital and just return to my village afterwards."

Said Lifa while gritting her teeth.

Apparently Harold had just jumped to conclusions and she was just, seemingly unwillingly, requesting to travel together with him.

However, if she was going to stop following at the royal capital, then it was no problem. He couldn't get involved if she returned by herself and ran into an unforeseen accident and died, so this was an advantage in terms of assuring Lifa's safety.

"You're worried? For this one?"

"Yeah, that's right. There is no way I could entrust Elu to you after all."

You barely even know Elu...

Harold had a hard time holding back that retort at her bravado.



Elu was looking at Harold, who was in the lead and advancing rapidly, as if he couldn't understand him.

Rather than expressionless, Harold looked ill humored. And he wasn't just making a face, that was the default for him. Perhaps his angry eyes were one of the factors that made him appear to be bad-tempered.

It had been three days since they had left mount Giran. And the only facial expression that Elu saw on him was this bad-tempered one, and the sarcastic, crooked smile that he often had when provoking Lifa.

Harold was a man of a few words but his way of speaking was extremely bad. He appeared to be constantly putting his all into turning everyone around him into enemies.

Elu hadn't figured him out on the inside yet, but from the outside, Harold couldn't be said to have a good character. Though Elu took pride in the many strong people he came into contact with, Harold really stood out among them, and not in a good way.

If it weren't for the prospect of obtaining information on the star memory, he would never have even considered stooping this low. If that turned out to be a lie, he would disappear immediately without a shred of hesitation.

That's what Elu, who shared only a few days with him, felt. So it wasn't hard to guess how people who had to deal with Harold day to day felt.

Hostility, disgust and scorn were all focused on Harold from his surroundings. Though the location was supposed to be quiet, Elu felt like he would start hearing hallucinatory insults at any time. This was people's evaluation of Harold at the『Astral Research and Development Center』where he was living.

Lifa, who had been consistently energetic so far, cowered beside Elu, even though she had been extremely excited about embarking on a ship for the first time a few hours prior. She was supposed to have far stronger willpower than any average man, and yet she was frightened by emotions that were directed to someone other than herself. Even Elu had to concentrate on slowing down his steps and suppressing the urge to hurry and leave this place even one moment sooner. The animosity of the people from this research center towards Harold was that severe.

Even though Harold was drowning in said animosity, he didn't seem to be disturbed by it. He had no fear of being struck by those ill feelings, but he didn't show any anger to oppose them either. He didn't show an attitude of shrinking back from it or being fed up with it, and he didn't put in any conscious effort to try to erase his facial expression either. Indifferent. That was the word that best described Harold.

(I wonder what he went through to be accustomed to this...)

It's difficult to disregard so much attention on one's self, whether it's friendly or hostile. All the more so when this extreme attention came from such a great number of people.

Elu suspected that Harold was lacking a basic emotion that normal people possess.

If not, then Elu had to admire Harold for his motivation to do this, no matter if said motivation was righteous or evil.

Harold's feet unexpectedly came to a stop. At the end of the corridor, before their eyes, was a white door.

A knock resounded. After a few seconds, the door was opened with a clank. The man who came out of it seemed to be in his thirties. He frowned for a

moment once he realized the one knocking was Harold. It seemed Harold was hated like some kind of abomination.

"...What's your business?"

"Don't ask the obvious, imbecile. Do you want to show off your low status that much?"

(The moment he opens his mouth, he's guaranteed to be hated.)

With a harsh environment like this, the man should have expected this outcome. There was no room for sympathy here, let alone from Harold, who didn't care about anyone around him and most likely had no use for sympathy whatsoever.

The face of the man receiving those harsh words instantly turned red, and his eyes glinted fiercely. He was quite obviously furious. He was trembling in anger, but regardless, the man tried to somehow ward off Harold's words.

"The chief is in the middle of an experiment. For your report, you'll have to come back when—"

"You should have been told that my report is the top priority. Or did you forget even that? Then just tell him I'll be coming back later. Even with your infantile memory span, you should be able to manage that. Well, if you think you can't handle it, I won't force you"

His sarcastic and provocative words kept coming out one after the other. Hearing this confirmed one thing, Harold was going extremely easy on Lifa with his badgering. His words were many times harsher now. As for the man, he seemed like he could die of apoplexy at any moment as he gave Harold a forbidding look. And then, when the dangerous atmosphere between the two was about to reach its climax.

"I am of the belief that some quarrels have their benefits, and some are futile. Which are you two going for? I don't know about you, but I expect it wouldn't be the beneficial kind."

A voice flat enough that one could doubt whether it came from a human. It had come from the back of the room with the white door.

There, was a man with white hair and a pallid face. While he had a tall and lean figure, his back was slightly bent which made him seem somewhat frail. But his most striking feature was his cold, dull eyes.

This was Justus Freund. A scientist who represented the royal capital.

Chapter 55

(Elu's Pov)

After Justus' intervention, Elu and the others were invited to his reception room. It was a calm room made entirely of wood, from the floor to the ceiling, including the walls. It didn't quite fit the image of a research center.

The room was also perfectly clean and tidy, and on the south side, there was a wooden sunroom where a few colorful flowers were growing.

How should I say this, that doesn't match the impression I got from Justus' appearance at all. Those were Elu's frank thoughts. Next to him, Lifa looked similarly surprised.

However, when Elu thought about it, Justus was only the research center's chief executive. It was unlikely that he would be involved with the interior design of the building, or that he would personally manage a reception room that had no direct relation to his research.

So the room was probably made based on the preferences and the original concept of the one in charge of the room.

"So, where'd you leave the tea cups?"

"Just sit the hell down. Who'd want to drink that disgusting tea you make?"

Even towards the man who, according to Elu's information, was supposed to be Harold's direct superior, he had no mercy.

However, while his mouth said those words, his hands were skillfully preparing a teapot and as many cups as there were people. It was a surprising spectacle for Elu and Lifa.

"Who said anything about you drinking it? I was just trying to entertain these ladies"

(TLN: People tend to assume Elu is a woman, but we still don't know about that, he probably keeps it ambiguous on purpose)

"Oh, so you want your guests to see your stinginess in all its glory, you're as vicious as ever."

"Says the one who ensnared a girl while on duty. You want to get yourself a

side wife?"

"Like hell I'd willingly marry such a thin girl."

"So you'd consider it if it was a voluptuous woman. Good luck getting your fiancée to approve of a mistress."

"How ridiculous for a scientist to jump to conclusions so easily. If you judge everything with such extreme logic, then that astral body research you take so much pride on isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"And who's the one who benefited from that research? Careful what you say, you're being rude."

"You better worry about yourself, bastard, your dementia is getting worse. How many times have I told you that I broke my engagement with that girl?"

Their verbal war kept going without eye contact. The other two spectated the savage exchange in mute amazement. While they argued without interrupting each other, they inversely seemed to be in perfect harmony.

But even though the content of their talk was completely hostile, the atmosphere between Harold and Justus was surprisingly calm. Of course, there wasn't even a ghost of a friendly atmosphere between them, but despite the enmity they threw at each other, their exchange seemed more like a business conversation.

There was a very mysterious sense of distance to it.

Meanwhile, Harold had served them tea.

Elu and Lifa were on a two-seater Sofa, and Justus was sitting face to face with them, as for Harold, he alone sat down by a window at a distance.

"Oh well. Please pay no heed to that eccentric man, you two— which reminds me, I haven't heard your names yet, have I?"

"I— I am Lifa Goodridge."

"My name is Elu. It's quite an honor to meet the famous Dr. Freund."

"I'm Justus Freund. Please don't stand on ceremony."

It was quite abnormal for something like that to be said without a smile or any expression at all. Well, Elu thought, I don't quite fit in the normal category

either.

"Thank you for your concern."

"So, why are you two here? I don't suppose you were invited by Harold, that would mean you've been through a cataclysm."

"Well, actually Lifa is the one who..."

Elu poked Lifa's arm with his elbow. After that signal, Lifa started to speak.

"I'm interested in magical research and I'm actually studying it myself. So I asked Harold to let me meet and speak to an expert of the field and..."

"With his reputation being what it is, we thought the one he worked for might fit the criteria."

"I see, it's quite unusual for that guy to accept a request like that."

"Well, it seems he was interested in an idea of hers that could involve the use of astral powers, though it's not really part of her research."

"Oho...."

Explained Elu, taking over Lifa's conversation. Justus took a sip of his drink while looking at Harold with a stern face, as if he was telling him he had been too careless.

The setting they had agreed upon was that the two friends, Lifa and Elu, had been staying together in the town of Attis where they happened to meet with Harold, and since they were aware of his connection to Doctor Justus, the two kept pestering him to bring them along with him.

Elu's first task had been to make an impression on Harold. When Lifa asked Harold to accompany her on her trip to mount Giran, she made a deal with him, a sort of trade-off stating "If you lend me your strength, I'll accept your terms". Though she hadn't expected the outcome of her words at the time, Elu believed that if he brought up that deal in this situation, it would be beneficial for Harold.

So, while having instructed Lifa to back up his words so that he wouldn't be exposed, Elu tried to read any information he could make out of Justus' words and conduct. However, even though he had been careful about more or less everything, he made no progress.

Therefore, he focused on Justus' research on magic— or rather, on what he called "astral bodies." But still, it was quite difficult for Elu to do much more alone.

Perhaps having anticipated that, Harold had spoken to Elu beforehand saying "I'm not expecting much. I'll consider any knowledge you achieve as a gain. Other than that, focus your whole attention on making sure that he doesn't notice any relation I might have with the Giffelts."

Even Harold himself was that vigilant. In other words, the man called Justus was extremely troublesome.

Elu thought back on the chain of events which surrounded Harold five years prior. He considered the all-powerful puppet master who was even able to manipulate the Tribunal, still hiding his identity.

Maybe that puppet master was Justus, or someone close to him.

Elu's honest thoughts were that if Harold was going to make him confront someone like that, he should have told Elu everything he knew. But Harold refused to do it, or perhaps he couldn't, which led Elu to believe Harold still had some big secrets.

Well, he's obviously no ordinary man after all.

(For now, I'll concentrate on the problem before my eyes. I can't lose my focus when facing this one.)

Elu reined his thoughts in and put impregnable defenses on his mind, ready to resist any scrutiny, while he smiled naturally, challenging Justus so the two would sound each other out.



(Harold's pov)

"But you sure do know a lot about Harold." *(Justus)*

"That's probably 'cause someone's been slyly spreading rumors around as they please." *(Harold)*

"I didn't know there were people like that. They're really the complete opposite of me, as I've only been speaking the truth about you." *(Justus)*

"Yeah, thanks to them, I get gloomy looks wherever I go, it's really annoying."

(Harold)

"I didn't know you were that sensitive. That discovery should be written down in the record books."(Justus)

You've really been telling people whatever you want, thought Harold spitefully. He couldn't hide that resentment as it oozed out of his words and his facial expression.

Needless to say that the one responsible for spreading Harold's bad reputation and ruining his image was none other than Justus himself. His ulterior motive was likely to isolate Harold and put him in a helpless state to make it easier to bind him. There is no such thing as a person who would be benevolent enough to help someone they heard only bad rumors about, so for now, Justus' expectations had been met with a huge success.

Because of him, Harold got stuck with that extremely disturbing alias, Knight Killer.

Moreover, his reputation was very bad with the staff of the research center where he lived. But there was no helping it since, from their perspective, they were living next door to an evil murderer who couldn't be described as a human being, and Harold had his faults, too.

To put it briefly, his open hostility frightened them. And so, Harold started living with his Switch constantly on whenever he was in the research center, with the exception of his room. Otherwise it would have been too hard for him to keep calm. His reasoning was that human hostility was much more frightening than any mighty monster.

Hence, Harold's words became even worse, thereby increasing the staff's animosity, and trapping him in a vicious circle. And that's basically what led to the current situation.

"But what I'm wondering about is that idea of yours that piqued Harold's interest. Can you tell me about it?"

"Yes. I wondered whether I could combine magic, which relies on an individual's nature, with the versatility of science and what I figured was—"

Lifa's self-made science and magic hybrid technique. Harold had instructed her to talk about it but to pretend that it was still just a theory.

Though Harold had many reasons, his biggest motive was to use Justus' technology and ideas to strengthen Lifa's power. From her fight with the Hydra, he deemed that the power of her attacks was not sufficient and that it needed to be raised further.

Truthfully, he initially intended to take care of the problem by meddling with Liner's group from the shadows later on, but this way was more efficient. Each man knows his own business best, so it was better to leave science to an actual scientist.

Naturally, since Lifa was going to join the Hero's party, she would have to fight with Justus sooner or later. It would disadvantageous if he was aware of her means of attacks when that time came. But that was just the logic on paper. But no matter how smart he was, it was unlikely that Justus would consider the battle aspect behind her research at this point in time. It would be difficult for him to find countermeasures even once he found out his opponents had Lifa in their ranks.

At that time, Liner's and the others' obstructed plans would just have to be corrected. Furthermore, Harold would secretly intervene and put his game knowledge to efficient use. And there wouldn't be much time wasted either, aside from the correction of the plan.

That's why he dragged Lifa to the research center despite being aware of the risks. It could be said that he had found a heaven-sent opportunity, even though it wasn't on purpose.

".....Mhm, I can understand why Harold was interested."

Justus let that thought escape him after listening to some of the theories developed by Lifa. By the way, though Harold was listening, there were too many technical words and he only understood about half of it.

Although Lifa had the appearance of a child, as her brain was capable was of developing antibiotics and obstructing Justus' plans, she was more than qualified to be referred to as a genius. Average as he was, there was no way Harold could follow this conversation of prodigies.

"So, what do you think? Are there some things that I can improve or....."

"Although I can't really say without putting this into practice, there are several points I have some thoughts about. I wouldn't mind teaching you, but

I'm already too busy as is."

Justus shifted his eyes to the room's clock. He probably didn't have much more free time left.

Unable to get any advice, Lifa could only reply "I-I see." dispiritedly, but Justus' next words were surprising.

"But your ideas and points of view are certainly wonderful. You can stay here for a while if you want. We'll get to discuss lots of things whenever I have some time."

"Huh, really?"

Shit, Lifa bit the bait without thinking. No, even I didn't think he would be willing to spare part of his private time. That Justus doesn't care much for other people.

Lifa's theories must have tugged at his heartstrings.

However, the more she stayed the more the risks increased. Every little thing she exposed from there on out could reveal the secrets of Harold & co, one after the other.

"Hold on, Lifa, if you do that, we'll get back to the village too late and our lie will be exposed. You do know uncle won't just forgive you after one good scolding this time, right?"

The one who interfered with that predicament was Elu. Harold didn't know if Elu came up with this on the spot or if he had prepared himself beforehand. But Elu was surprisingly natural as he came up with a lie that explained why they couldn't stay for too long.

At first, Lifa's expression looked blank as she didn't understand what Elu was saying, but she soon accurately grasped the situation and her little face became pale. From an outsider's point of view, she seemed to become frightened upon imagining the scolding from the uncle that Elu spoke about.

"What does this mean?"

"The two of us come from a small village. Most of the villagers there make a living by working in the fields and raising livestock. Since it's that kind of village, Lifa, who's devoted to science, stands out a little, and her family has strictly told

her to stop wasting her time on research."

What Elu was talking about were Lifa's actual circumstances in the game's story. It was no lie.

Though Harold wondered how Elu knew about that, Lifa's facial expression didn't turn surprised but embarrassed. In other words, Lifa had probably personally told Elu in the previous days. It seemed like, in just a few days, their relationship had deepened to the point where she didn't mind speaking to Elu about things like that.

"Though this time I went as far as Attis, I actually lied to my parents that I was going sightseeing in the Royal Capital. So I cannot stay for too long." (*Lifa*)

"Mhm. Then, how long can you stay?"

If it were up to Harold, he would have answered "We can't." without a second thought.

However, that was not Elu's answer. After a few seconds, he answered with a serious face.

"Two weeks is our limit."

"Is that so? But it's just as I thought. You are smart. I'd have had some doubts if you had directly replied that you can't stay."

From those words, Harold slowly understood Elu's intentions. And his whole body was covered in a cold sweat.

From the earlier conversations, there was no way Elu didn't know the time it took to go from the village to Attis and the royal capital. And upon their meeting with Harold in Attis, they boarded a ship with him towards the royal capital. Considering the time Harold's given duty would take and the time it took him to come back, everything was pretty clear.

Usually, it would be unlikely for two girls who came from a small village by themselves to travel using something as expensive as a boat. At best they'd come by carriage, at worst they'd come on foot. Either way, there was a wide difference in speed when compared to a ship.

And yet, they came to the royal capital. Whether the royal capital was on the way towards the village or not, considering the Royal Capital's distance from Attis, it would be strange if they weren't considerably ahead of their initial

schedule.

If they had been late, they probably wouldn't have bothered to meet with Justus at all. Whatever reasons they came up with, there was no way for them to justify not having plenty of time to spare.

Harold had believed that Elu's lie had no weakness, that it was perfect. However, far from being just turned down by Justus, Elu gave him enough information to make Lifa, and himself, stay.

And the worst part was Justus' last words. They implied that he didn't trust Elu in the slightest. This way, it became impossible for Elu to make any rash moves.

"When you want to return, I'll find you a ship that will get you to the closest town to your village. That way you'll be able to extend your stay."

Proposed Justus. But in Harold's ears, that proposition sounded like a death sentence.

Chapter 56

(Harold's Pov)

From the stone fountain at the center of the research center's garden, clean water was flowing smoothly into a basin.

Without sparing a glance at that flow of water or the garden's blooming flowers, Harold was sitting on a bench with his hands resting on his knees, contemplating the distant sky. But the reflection of that sky was nowhere to be seen in Harold's eyes. All he could see was the word "Regret," with all the heavy feelings that came with it.

(I got way too carried away...)

He couldn't deny that he jumped the gun at getting a reliable friend in Elu, one of the original story's characters.

However, his opponent was Justus. The last boss.

He should have been more cautious, but as soon as things took a turn for the better, he acted rashly. *I've been way too bold*, he thought bitterly.

The worst part was that Elu could have become his trump card but had now been marked. With Elu under suspicion, the actions he could accomplish without help had become limited.

Like this, the pace of securing people to strengthen Liner's group was back to its starting point. It could even become worse than what Harold had initially planned if Justus' surveillance tightened due to his suspicions. Harold was drowning in raging streams of self-loathing.

As he was stricken with that feeling, a person's shadow approached behind him. Harold's eyes were still pointed at the sky, but he was somehow able to sense whose presence it was.

"May I sit here?"

"...Why bother asking when you already know the answer?"

"But you didn't reserve this seat, right?"

Meeting Harold's sarcasm head on, Elu sat down next to him. However, there

was so much distance between the two that another person could fit in the middle.

As they both kept silent, time quietly ran by.

Isn't it suspicious for the two of us to be alone in such a deserted place?

Although Harold had such a reflection, he immediately thought again "it's too late for that already."

It was clear as day that Justus' words were a threat along the lines of "I have my eyes on you."

So Justus probably wouldn't question Harold if he insisted that he was having a more in depth chat with Elu. Even if someone approached them, they would notice since their field of view was wide open. They didn't need to worry about anyone eavesdropping.

As Harold thought about these things, Elu finally opened his mouth. And his first words were an apology.

"I'm very sorry. Not only did I fail to get the results you hoped for, but I even gave him a chance to press us."

Harold couldn't answer right away.

Elu did not need to apologize. Rather, at that time, it was thanks to Elu's followup that there was no fatal error. In the first place, Elu's job was to handle information, and that didn't prepare him for the role he had been assigned. The problem was Elu mistakenly blamed himself. He couldn't get that feeling out of his mind and he was currently in a state of self-loathing.

"Don't think too highly of yourself. I told you I didn't expect much from you."

"...Right, you did say that."

"Look, It's your problem if you want to feel responsible for my mistakes, but don't drag that behind you and let it come back to bite us later. If you're going to get stuck in that state of mind, you better get rid of that shitty guilt of yours right now."

"Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"Do you really think that's possible?"

"Guess not. Oh well, If that's how it is, then I suppose I'll just switch my

mood."

Elu raised both of his arms to the sky and stretched himself. Perhaps it was Harold's imagination, but Elu's voice and countenance seemed to become lighter.

He took a deep breath, and then, he continued talking with a somewhat worried face.

"The issue is that, while I can recover like this, Lifa cannot."

"What?"

"It seems like she regrets reflexively taking Justus' invitation."

Lifa had misunderstood. The one who allowed her to follow him and convinced her to come along to the research center later on was Harold himself, Lifa was just used and dragged into this.

Normally, from Lifa's point of view, she would stand to gain more from associating with Justus than Harold. Well, that eventuality would be troublesome so Harold wasn't going to prevent her from siding with himself. Unable to comprehend Harold's facial expressions, Elu seemed confused.

"Is it that surprising? Anyone would be worried when getting in their friend's way."

"...I don't recall making friends with that girl."

"Maybe, but you sure don't have many friends."

Said Elu while looking at Harold with a surprised look. And Harold couldn't really argue with that.

When speaking of friends, the first person to come to his mind was Itsuki. Though Harold hadn't seen much of him lately, their friendship was still going. They had been friends for nearly eight years.

(TLN: Itsuki = Erica's big brother)

However, Harold couldn't come up with anyone else.

Strictly speaking, Liner, who he fought in the competition five years ago, wasn't really his friend. The same went for Robinson, Sid, and Elen, who were Harold's classmates in the Knight Order. He hadn't seen them since his dismissal.

And although Harold was mentally older than Zen, the servant at the Stokes

residence, their physical ages were too disparate, so they never achieved a great sense of comradeship. As for Erica, she and Harold were like cats and dogs.

In conclusion, Harold's only friend was Itsuki. Thinking back upon his situation again, his interpersonal relationships were frail, and his friends few. But that was only natural since Harold's mouth would spit insults whenever he initiated contact with someone or anyone else approached him.

As Harold was finding excuses for himself, his mouth let out the words of a sore loser.

"Things like friends are a waste of time."

"But that depends from one person to another, doesn't it? And in Lifa's case, friendship seems to be important."

Harold was no stranger to that feeling, even though it was a mystery why she would recognize him as a friend after the ridicule he put her through on their journey here. Nevertheless, if Harold casually went to comfort her, his unrestrained words would only add fuel to the fire.

But judging from Elu's words, Lifa was feeling considerably down, so Harold wanted to at least indirectly tell her not to worry.

However, now was not the time.

"Hmph, who cares?"

The truth was that he did care, but there was something he wanted to speak of with Elu so he forcibly changed the topic. He had better tell Elu now while there was still little worry of someone eavesdropping.

"Leaving that aside, bastard, I'll tell you about the job I've granted you."

"I'm listening."

Sensing the change in atmosphere, Elu adjusted himself. There were two things that Harold wanted Elu to do. But before that, he had to explain to Elu about the group that he made, under the radar, by recruiting people throughout his missions.

"You'll get the power to make use of the organization that I've started."

"Your organization?"

"It's a mercenary group called『Frieri』."

In the game, Frieri was a mercenary group started by Cody, after he resigned from the knight order, by recruiting fallen mercenaries. That organization did basically everything, be it escort missions, war, monster subjugation or even looking for various things.

However, due to Harold's many actions, Cody didn't leave the knight order. On the contrary, he got promoted further than he ever was in the original story. Based on the game, there were events that were supposed to be cleared by cooperating with Frieri, but a major premise of that happening was Cody's resignation from the knight order. Without that, Frieri wouldn't come to exist. In short, Harold was afraid that this would interfere with the progress of the original story.

Fortunately, Tasuku left a portion of the revenue generated by LP farming in Harold's name, so there were no financial troubles with the early expenses.

"I'll get to make use of them? I've never commanded a battle before."

"That will be handled by the men on site. I'm giving you the authority to decide whether Frieri should take action or not. And you may also mobilize them."

"...Are you seriously going to give that kind of authority to a newcomer like me?"

Harold wanted to tell him that he knew where he was coming from. This position was Hardly fitting for Elu.

However, Harold could see that Elu had it in him to eventually make it. He was someone who could use a plethora of information to get a correct, extensive, and profound understanding of a situation. Even though it would be difficult for him to handle battle command and tactics, he could demonstrate his abilities when it came to managing an organization.

Above all, Harold's group was short-handed and just didn't have anyone better than Elu to take command of Frieri. And if Harold couldn't make friends with Elu then he would have to leave the role to one of the other mercenaries he had gathered. But he suspected that bunch would overdo it either way.

"I'll establish the organization's course of action and give out the essential instructions. Your role will be to handle the other, smaller instructions, and to mobilize Frieri when I'm in a position where I can't make a move myself."

"That's quite easy to say, but really, it's a big responsibility, isn't it?"

Good grief, said Elu as he let out a sigh.

That's the only reaction he showed while speaking of a "big responsibility." And yet, he murmured to himself "Could this be a show of trust...?", but the truth was that he made this mutter audible on purpose.

Since it didn't seem necessary for Harold to give any importance to this, he naturally just disregarded Elu.

"By the way, how many people are there in Frieri?"

"There are 14 people, but that's not enough. You must make use of your clan's information network and scout some capable people."

"That's fine, but what about the money? Without a reasonable amount, It's going to be hard to entice mercenaries. “】

"If you're talking about the small change you'll need to hire mercenaries, just name the price and I'll pay."

Harold was being serious, his capital had increased to a significant sum. If Harold didn't have to worry about death flags and the future collapse of the world, he could retire right away and live a full, comfortable life.

Well, if he hadn't possessed Harold's body in the first place, then it would have been complicated for him to develop the LP farming method and rebuild the Sumeragi family.

"How generous. Where on earth did you get that kind of money?"

"You don't need to know."

"Too bad. Well, I get the gist of the situation, now I'd like to see that Frieri group with my own eyes to get a sense of it but..."

Elu cut himself off with a worried groan. His line of sight was turned towards the research center's buildings.

To be more precise, he was probably looking at the reception room where he

had been with Justus just before. That alone was enough for Harold to understand that Elu felt badly about his slip of the tongue.

There was no doubt Justus had marked Elu as a suspicious individual in the earlier meeting. And was it really possible for someone as careful as Justus to let a person of interest like Elu roam around freely?

This was no place for optimism. Getting carried away could only end badly. From here, Elu had to assume Justus was always watching his every action.

"If you have a method to slip through that guy's surveillance, we can go right now."

"Let's hold off on that. Well, I mean, I did think of a method, but considering the current conditions, I have a request."

"...Speak."

"I'd like to get in touch with Frieri by myself. So I want you to give me something to prove that I was sent by you."

"What's your motive?"

"It's to deceive Justus' eyes."

Harold figured Elu was saying that moving alone would be less conspicuous. Certainly, Elu would stand out if he was seen together with Harold, and it would make it seem like Harold was plotting something. Especially now.

"So please inform the people from Frieri that I will be arriving by myself. I will keep my appearance, age, and gender completely hidden, since I don't want to give out too much information in the interest of concealing Giffelt's nature. "】

"Don't you want to spread the name of Giffelt?"

"That's just useful for gathering information and gaining some prestige. Being recognized as Giffelt on personal business carries a high risk."

"Well, that's fine with me, as long as things go smoothly."

Harold understood Elu's concern and had no reason to refuse. So long as they weren't unreasonable, Harold wanted to avoid refusing Elu's requests as much as possible, since he would be troubled if their arrangement broke down. Elu seemed to think he had become a subordinate, but the fact of the matter was

that Harold thought of him as a comrade

However, in the game's story, Elu had introduced himself as Giffelt to Liner and the others; perhaps it was somehow beneficial to his family. Maybe he knew that he could reach the star memory with Liner's help.

Though Harold believed that was due to the stretched, distorted logic of the game's system.

"Thanks. Also, one more thing."

Elu's words roused Harold from his deep thoughts. Now was not the time to think about this.

"You're not done yet? Don't you have any shame?"

"I'm not going to ask for anything big. I'd like you to give me a few hours of your time tomorrow."

It certainly wasn't anything big. Harold didn't have any missions scheduled for the next day, or even for a while after that, so he basically had too much free time and didn't mind giving it away. Harold believed that relaxing in his time off would drastically increase his risk of dying.

"It better not be for something stupid."

"Of course not, it's for something very important. For our future."

Elu showed a smile of deep significance. But Harold failed to notice the meaning behind it.

Chapter 57

The day after meeting Elu in the garden, Harold woke up in the gloom of dawn before sunrise.

He got ready quickly and went outside, silently leaving the premises of the still sleeping research center. In his hands were the two swords he used in his fight against the hydras.

Having taken an adequate distance from the research center, Harold was swinging his two swords left and right, as if he was facing invisible enemies. On top of that, he also made use of his hand-to-hand combat techniques, throwing some punches and kicks between the sword slashes.

This was the self-discipline he had applied to himself almost every day for the last eight years. His strength, speed, and accuracy had reached a whole new level from where he had started. The wild yet elegant sword dance he displayed would overwhelm any witnesses.

The short version was that Harold was practicing the game's combos. For him, it was like a hobby that happened to bring some profit.

However, as the proverb says "Perseverance is the key to success" And even considering the high specs of Harold's body, there was no denying that this was the result of his own efforts. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to kill the two hydras so effortlessly.

Harold continued his training for two hours straight without a break, as if there was no limit to his endurance. Although he was drenched in sweat when he finished, his body was still terrifying as it had plenty of energy to spare. After a cold bath to wash away the accumulated sweat, Harold walked through the research center as if he owned the place while staff members started showing up here and there. Of course, he had turned on his Switch. So the hostile gazes piercing him were no trouble and he arrived at his destination without a hitch.

That destination was the dining hall, and it had rather open feel to it. A portion of its walls were made of glass, and the morning sunlight streamed in, making the room brilliant with reflections.

This dining hall could be used day and night, and even from early in the morning for the sake of the staff members who stayed up all night.

Harold had become a regular customer here, ever since he gave his body to the research center. Though the staff of the dining hall hated Harold as much as the other personnel did, they had already given up on interacting with him so it didn't matter.

Harold properly made his order, and with the breakfast he received, he settled down at his usual position, a table for two, by a window. By the way, Harold didn't stand out much at the current time since there weren't many people, but even at lunchtime, the seats around him were always empty. In addition, his back was riddled by malicious gossip and the intermittent impudent gazes that were fired at him.

Like this, Harold's lonely ways kept on steadily growing worse.

As Harold took his meal while coming up with such a sad self-analysis, a noisy group of people entered the hall. Lifa and Elu were among them. There were about ten people in the group, and, excluding Lifa and perhaps Elu, they were all men.

By the standards of the research center, the men surrounding the two were on the young side. However, even the youngest among them was in his mid-twenties, which was still a decade older than Lifa. *Come to think of it, just how old is Elu?* While Harold was considering that, Lifa and the others sat down wherever they could near the center of the dining hall, along the oblong tables where twenty other people were already sitting.

Perhaps it was a "let's get to know each other" kind of gathering. He could feel the ulterior motives that came from the men, but the man to woman ratio was about 9 to 1 so there was no helping it. Lifa looked very young, but by this world's standards, people wouldn't point their fingers at someone having a relationship or marrying her.

From Harold's point of view, she looked like a middle school student, and she sometimes behaved like she was in grade school, so all these adult males surrounding her reeked of depravity.

Incidentally, Harold was curious how the surrounding men would react if Elu's still-uncertain-gender happened to be male.

As Harold thought of that, his eyes suddenly met Elu's. Elu smiled for just an instant and merely gave Harold a nod.

Though their relationship wasn't close enough for them to understand each other through eye contact, Harold figured this probably meant something along the lines of "Don't worry, I'm watching over her." The day before, Harold had told Elu to avoid leaving Lifa by herself as much as possible, for he didn't like her getting in contact with Justus.

Perhaps Elu's action was intended to soothe Harold's worries.

Elu was a very reliable person so Harold trusted him. Therefore, Harold moved his chin as if telling Elu "I know already, just get back to it." Perhaps Harold's meaning had gotten through, as Elu joined the chat between the people sitting with him.

That must have been the occasion for Elu to gather some information.

Thus, Harold returned his focus to his meal, and silently ate the same food from the same standard menu he usually ordered.

It didn't take him long to empty his plate. When he stood up to leave the dining hall, his surroundings became noisy for some reason. Moreover, the focus of that noise was Harold himself.

While he certainly was as hated as he could possibly be, he had no clue what would cause a reaction like this. The moment Harold's feet stopped to find out what was happening, a voice came from behind him.

"Harold, you're leaving? Where are you going?"

The one standing there was Elu. Next to Elu stood Lifa, who had been dragged along by her hand. Her face showed a little awkwardness.

Looking at the seats where the two were supposed to be, the men from the earlier gathering turned their line of sight towards Harold in hatred. Even Harold couldn't help but wince a little from that resentment.

They probably were thinking that two beauties had just been snatched away from them by a detestable man. Their hostility was different than usual so Harold decided not to look at them.

"Where I'm going is none of your business."

"It is. Didn't you say you'd give me some of your time yesterday?"

"I said we'd meet midday."

It was still around 7:30 in the morning now.

Few people would describe this time as midday. But perhaps Elu was among those few.

"I heard that you were basically constantly free. So I thought we could do this a bit earlier."

"Even then, you should have confirmed that first."

"Oh, sorry. Then, do you have anything to do right now?"

"....."

He had nothing to do. In fact, he had so much spare time he could leave and go on a trip right away if Elu had asked him.

Had it been up to him, Harold would have suggested they go as far as the hot springs of the Sumeragi house. His Japanese mindset was always seeking a bath.

"If it's fine, then please. I think it would be good if we could have more time for the first date between the three of us."

"D-date?!"

Lifa yelled hysterically. Because of that, those shocking words even reached the staff members who were looking closely at Harold and the others.

Instantly, a wave of killing intent came from the numerous staff bachelors.

Harold got the impression they might rush him, shouting "Chiri to tomoni messeyo!" Though he probably wouldn't lose one-on-one in a close quarters battle, if he were outnumbered by enemies following the Way of the Shura, he would most likely be annihilated. It's not like he could deal with having his heartbeat stopped.

(Evil Ryu, who follows the way of the Shura, shouts "I'll stop your heartbeat!" at the end of his fights.)

(...Wait, no! This isn't Street fighter!)

Harold somehow managed to straighten his confused and jumbled thoughts. This confusion only served to show how daunting Elu's words had been.

Though this uproar depended on Lifa getting surprised, Elu wasn't the kind of

person who would accidentally attract attention in a place like this, so he probably had some kind of motive to purposely drop a bomb like a fake three person date.

However, the only one in this place aware of that was Harold. For all the others, what they saw was a man, unanimously hated by everyone, the lowest of the low, trash lesser than a human being, who wanted to take two beautiful girls out on the town and keep them close. There was even a chance that some guy would show up, driven by righteous indignation, to “rescue Elu and Lifa from Harold’s vicious ways!”

To avoid being involved in these kinds of troublesome matters, Harold made a strategic withdrawal.

"So, Harold. Wait for us at the main entrance! As for the specific time of our meeting, it’s—"

Elu ostentatiously announced these words to Harold’s retreating back. Due to that merciless final blow, Harold was convinced that Elu was making trouble on purpose. If Elu was going to act like this, then Harold would have preferred to be notified about that in their earlier conversation, rather than them talking about moving the time of their outing up.

This situation had become even more troublesome for Harold.



Although the morning’s various events had robbed Harold of his energy, he arrived promptly at the time specified by Elu. His arms folded and leaning back against the gatepost of the research center’s main entrance, Harold waited with a sullen expression.

"Hey there, sorry to keep you waiting."

One of the people he had been waiting for, Elu, appeared without a hint of shame. Facing Elu’s fresh smile, Harold didn’t feel like complaining, but instead would prefer Elu explain the motive behind his earlier behavior.

The dining hall’s matter seemed to have already spread across the whole research center, and now he was getting looks of resentment from every direction. He didn’t feel any real danger to himself, but it was extremely annoying.

However, what Harold was the most worried about was Lifa's suspicious behavior.

"G-Good morning..."

She looked depressed, didn't meet his eyes, and her voice was shaking, showing her nervousness.

From all these elements, Harold reached one answer.

(Don't tell me she's still feeling down from being tricked by Justus)

Certainly, he had told her not to give Justus any opportunities to exploit. She was sorry for not being able to abide by that, while simultaneously being afraid of a scolding from Harold.

Though he was told about this beforehand by Elu, Harold didn't think Lifa was that dispirited. She had made herself small, like a kid who was being scolded.

As Harold stepped forward, Lifa jumped back in surprise. Without minding that, Harold put his left hand on Lifa's head. And then, after securing his grip, he applied some strength, once again inflicting an iron claw on her.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!"

After watching Lifa struggle for about three seconds, Harold loosened his hand.

Now free, Lifa glared at Harold, as expected.

"Just what are you doing?!"

"Waking you up."

Without elaborating, Harold passed out of the research center's gates.

Lifa followed behind him while raising her voice in protest. Unaffected by that, Harold's ears picked up the words that Elu was telling to himself as he smiled wryly.

"Did he do this so they could get even? ...Perhaps."

Harold was a little surprised that Elu understood his actions that accurately, though he didn't necessarily need him to do so.

The reason for his action was his belief that, judging from Lifa's character,

words alone wouldn't be enough to get through to her, and even if words were an option, he didn't know what kind of insults would pop out of his mouth if he thoughtlessly tried to comfort her and cheer her up.

From an outside perspective, it would be very hard to notice Harold's concern. Usually, it was almost impossible for him to communicate properly. Lifa seemed to be dissatisfied on the way to the town's center, but when the group arrived at Main Street, the royal capital's pride, Lifa's mood immediately improved. "Wow!" She shouted in joy as she merrily walked to and fro down the street. She fit the image of a country bumpkin perfectly. It was as if whatever had made her feel down had been completely forgotten. While Elu warmly watched Lifa's retreating figure, Harold addressed him in a low voice, so that only he could hear him.

"Now tell me, what's the meaning behind this farce?"

"I thought that, if we are under suspicion anyway, we might as well take the initiative and make ourselves stand out."

That was apparently the conclusion Elu had reached, but Harold couldn't figure out his aim.

Sure, doing these kinds of things in public not only focused the research center's attention on Harold, but on Elu and Lifa as well. Perhaps doing this would make it harder for Justus to make any moves on the two?

That's all that Harold could come up with. His game knowledge wasn't of much use for this kind of thing.

"More importantly, Harold. Did you prepare the item I requested yesterday, to prove that I'm one of your people?"

Elu suddenly changed the subject. Meanwhile, Lifa was scrutinizing the display of a store that sold fancy goods. *Seems like she has quite the girly tastes*, thought Harold rudely.

"If you hold onto this, you'll be recognized as a comrade."

As he said so, Harold took out a key made of silver, with a crest engraved on it— Frieri's logo. It was a fine piece he obtained through roundabout means, not by asking an artisan of the royal capital, but a worker in some town he dropped by during a mission.

While he was at it, Harold had also written a letter with his own handwriting, containing information that only he would know, in which he stated that Elu would be taking command of the organization.

"Is this a key to the hideout's door?"

"It just looks like a key for show."

It was only made to smoothly confirm whether someone belonged to Frieri or not, so it didn't have any purpose as a key.

But since it was shaped like a key, if an outsider found it, he would probably look for a door he could use it on. That's why Harold had the idea of giving it this shape, to mislead people. But frankly speaking, he had some afterthoughts.

Incidentally, the current members of Frieri had been given bracelets and copper coins with the same logo. It was a craftsmanship that demanded some skill so it ate up a non-negligible amount of money, but Harold was satisfied overall. He believed it was important to invest in some nice-looking equipment for the organization's first steps.

Though Elu looked with curious eyes at the unusable key he was given, he seemed convinced for the time being.

"Mhm. By the way, where is the the base located?"

Harold silently handed Elu a sheet of paper. Naturally, the place written down on the paper wasn't in the royal capital, which was basically under Justus' feet. Having said that, it would be difficult to travel there quickly if it was too far from the royal capital, and it would stand out if people started gathering in a small town.

A town that was far enough from the royal capital that Justus' influence couldn't reach it, and yet was relatively well populated and developed. That's where Frieri's stronghold was located.

"You better not lose it."

"Roger. Then, let's stop talking about work for a moment and enjoy our sightseeing."

"I don't need to go looking around here..."

Harold had been living here for more than five years, so there were almost no

places that he didn't know.

He instinctively let out a sigh. When he thought about how this whole troublesome situation came to be just for the sake of this one discussion, Harold felt a headache.

But that did not affect Elu's smile.

"Don't say that. I know there is nothing fresh for you and I to see in this town, but for Lifa it's.... Oh!"

Elu staggered as a man, coming from the opposite direction, lightly jostled his shoulder. It didn't seem like Elu was about to fall down, but Harold still immediately grabbed him by his thin shoulders and supported him.

Elu's body was quite delicate. Though his exact age had never been officially established in the game's lore, judging from his appearance, he was around 16 or 15. Was it really possible for a man of that age to be this thin?

Though Harold had never stopped to consider this up until now, he suddenly had these thoughts. In a way, Elu was the most mysterious character of the game's story.

"Thank you. You're unexpectedly kind."

"Stop with the blabbering, moron."

Embarrassed from being called kind for the first time in a very long while, Harold suddenly let go of Elu. Having noticed the gesture, Elu was chuckling at him.

In his awkwardness, Harold pretended to be oblivious and went to secure Lifa, who was bustling around the street and was about to become a lost child.

Chapter 58

(Lifa's Pov)

For Lifa, life in the royal capital was full of freshness and stimulation. There were numerous things she could never see or experience through her whole life in her village.

Although she seemed like she had spontaneously forgotten about the state of affairs thanks to this great environment, she still wasn't able to enjoy herself from the bottom of her heart due to the considerable self-reproach she felt from troubling Harold with her careless conduct.

To get rid of these pent up feelings, all she had to do was to give him an apology, but whenever she met Harold face to face, she would give him a tit for a tat in response to his usual provocations, and she would always end up losing the timing to apologize.

And, on the third day of her stay, her heart was still unsettled. On this day, she finally had her first discussion with Justus.

It only lasted for an hour or so. However, it was enough to impress Lifa from how formidable Justus was.

He offered her new perspectives, and new ideas. One after the other, he found new ways to improve some points of Lifa's logic that she had deemed to be perfect until now. Lifa felt guilty, but considering that this could improve her magic, her excitement far exceeded any shame or regret that she felt. However, Lifa's mood still hadn't cleared up.

"Haaah....."

"You don't look well, Lifa-chan. What's wrong? "】

It was around the time the sun started setting. As Lifa was relaxing in a free space, a man who happened to be present called out to her. Even though she didn't remember his name, Lifa still showed a courteous smile.

The man sat down, facing Lifa, as if it were natural.

"Nothing really...."(Lifa)

"Earlier, Lifa asked the boss about the technicalities of one of her inventions,

but it turned out to have more shortcomings than she expected so she's feeling a little down."

"Mister Justus is really merciless..."(*man*)

Elu nonchalantly sat next to Lifa and joined the conversation. That was a lie made up so that the man wouldn't inquire too much. The last few days, Lifa had started feeling like she didn't want to talk much with the staff members.

"But if that's all, there is nothing to worry about. I thought for sure that bastard had given you a hard time."

And this, was the reason for her reluctance. The staff members always brought up Harold, in a more or less hostile way. Their malice came to be because of Harold's inhuman behavior that they learned about from hearsay and his behavior in general, in other words, this was Harold's responsibility. She didn't feel like ignoring that and covering for Harold.

Harold's personality certainly was twisted, whenever he opened his mouth, all that would come was wave of sarcasm, cynicism, and scorn. She could understand how people would dislike him.

However, for Lifa, that wasn't all there was to Harold. He took the risk of fighting a hydra for a request that was based on a mere verbal promise. And Harold kept his promise even in the state of emergency where two hydras appeared at the same time. If he really was evil, he would have immediately run away, and yet he helped without any hesitation. Would an outrageous, selfish person, honestly keep such a promise? Lifa, at least, didn't think so. He could have done it expecting to reap some returns later on, but in the end, this only served to help Lifa's research, it didn't seem like Harold himself had benefited in any way.

"Well, there is no need to be cautious, he hasn't done anything to us."

"That's to make you lose your guard! You should stay away from that guy."

The man insisted on how dangerous Harold was. For him, it was probably a fact, and he was likely really worried about Lifa and Elu's well being. However, that just made Lifa confused.

The man kept going on and on, hurling abuses about Harold. While listening to him, Elu questioned the man about why he was saying such things, so as to investigate Harold's past. It wasn't a conversation Lifa was eager to listen to. As Lifa had such thoughts, she felt worse and worse. Or rather, she felt actually sick.

".....Sorry, I'm going back to my room."

Saying that while not paying attention to Elu and the man's voices, Lifa left her seat. Without looking back, she returned to the room allocated to her, lay down on her bed and pulled her futon's blanket all the way up to her head. This was a habit of hers.

Whenever she received a harsh scolding from her mother, whenever her research met a dead end, in short, whenever something bad happened to her, she would bury herself in her futon and try to calm her mind within the darkness. As she lay in her bed while holding her knees, various thoughts were going in circle inside Lifa's head, she was thinking about her doubts regarding Harold, and about the regrets she had from her actions, but she couldn't reach a solution.

She didn't know for how long she kept doing this but when Lifa came to herself, she realized she had fallen asleep in that same posture. She had probably been in her bed for a while as she was sweating buckets and her shirt was sticking to her skin, making her uncomfortable.

She groaned a little as her face slowly came out of her bed. When she peeked to check the outside of her window, the dark veil of the night had already arrived. It seemed she had been sleeping for a quite a long time.

"Are you up?"

She turned over towards the direction of that voice, and there was Elu, who was reading a hardcover book using only the light of Lifa's bedside light. Suddenly closing his book, Elu took a tray from a table and brought it to Lifa. On the tray were a sandwich and a salad. Moreover, Elu poured some ice water from a jug to a glass and handed it to Lifa.

"How are you feeling? I brought you some snacks, but if it's not enough, I'll go bring some more from the dinning hall."

"No, this is fine. Thank you."

Lifa didn't feel all that hungry so this was enough. First, she drank half of the ice water she'd be given, and then took a deep breath.

Elu was watching Lifa with gentle eyes. Lifa was a little embarrassed from that gaze.

"What?"

"It looks like you're worrying about a lot of things, I wonder if we could talk about that. Maybe I'm putting my nose where it doesn't belong, but still."

Apparently, Elu had guessed what was going on in Lifa's heart. Well, she wasn't particularly hiding her thoughts either as she wanted to talk to Elu about that.

While thinking this, Lifa slowly started talking about what was on her mind.

"Elu, what do you think of Harold?"

"Are you asking me if the rumors about him are right?"

"Yes"

Elu accurately figured what Lifa wanted to ask about. Perhaps he had held similar thoughts.

"I don't really know. His manner of speaking is bad, and I can't say he has a good personality, but he's not a cruel man that you could portray as some sort of evil murdering fiend either. If I may borrow his words, it seems like someone has been spreading bad rumors about him."

"Now that you mention, he did say that"

Maybe that explained it all. In that case, maybe Harold wasn't such a bad person.

However, as Lifa started leaning in that direction, Elu pulled her right back.

"However, there is no smoke without fire. Judging from his personality, it wouldn't be surprising if he caused some big problems here and there and accumulated grudges all over the place. That's why, I don't really know.... Or rather, there isn't much that is known about Harold in general, so I can't make a verdict based only on the information I have on hand. “】

"But you seemed to know a lot about him."

"That was just based on rumors. Like with the tribunal's case, his informations are usually kept hidden. He's likely concealing them himself, but that's all I know, he probably has many secrets."

"Harold's secrets....."

He was given the death penalty based on circumstantial evidence, without any positive proof. There was a high chance that the execution had been arranged by someone. Moreover, following that masquerade, he was sent as a test subject for the research center so as to avoid the execution.

All that Lifa knew about the situation was what Elu had taught her, but there were a lot of strange points to the story. Why did Harold wear a uniform of the Sarian Empire? And why did the man who was involved in the deliberations suddenly lose his mind when he was asked about the case? There were too many mysteries remaining.

And at the very center of all this, was Harold. Lifa couldn't even guess how many secrets Harold really had.

"Maybe it's going to be difficult to not be influenced by the voices surrounding you, but remember you can decide what to do after evaluating him with your own eyes. That's your privilege as a person who gets to be near Harold."

"..... Yes, you're right. Thank you, I feel a bit better."

"That's great."

Now that Elu brought that up, Lifa realized how right it was. Lifa always did what she wanted to do without sparing a thought for the voices of the people surrounding her and whatnot. Even though she was told to stop trying to become an inventor, and that it was an impossible goal for her, she still made her own decision, went through with it and came to where she currently was. She estimated people the same way she evaluated an object's worth, based on the well defined standards she had established within her. Or rather, that's how it should have been, but for some reason, when it came to Harold, she was completely lost.

(Maybe deep down, I just don't want Harold to be a bad person....?)

That thought suddenly crossed her mind.
He was shunned by his surroundings, excluded. He was solitary, no one befriended him or understood him. His circumstances were similar to Lifa's, who was treated as an oddity in her village.
Maybe she had overlapped Harold's situation on her own, so she might have subconsciously convinced herself that if Harold was a good person, then she could prove that she was good as well. It was shameful but when she thought about it, it made sense.
What kind of man was Harold? She couldn't see his true colors. Lifa had only perceived the parts of him which appeared on the surface, she hadn't tried to understand his insides.

Because of Lifa's nature, these thoughts became unbearable to her. In the blink of an eye, she ate up the sandwich and the salad in front of her.

"Thank you!"

"You shouldn't eat so fast."

"I want to go meet Harold, just for a short time."

"At this time of the day?"

Elu pointed at the clock while smiling wryly at Lifa who started moving in a hurry. The clock indicated that the next day was coming soon. Harold was possibly already asleep. Even if he wasn't, this was no time for visits. And, what surprised Lifa the most was that she had been asleep until this time.

"Yeah, I'd probably bother him if I go now....."

"Well, it's a good time to go night crawling." (*TIn: Elu says Yobai, you're free to search that*)

"I won't!"

"I won't stop you, and I'll even keep it secret."

"Keep this kind of solicitude to yourself!"

While firmly retorting to Eu's mockery, Lifa gave up on visiting Harold. Because of how late it was, Lifa decided to go to bed, but since she had been soundly asleep until right before, she had a hard time becoming sleepy.

For several hours, she kept turning around then staying motionless in her bed again and again. By the time the light of dawn started coming to the sky, she still hadn't been attacked by drowsiness. It was a familiar sky for Lifa who had many sleepless night from getting too enthusiastic about her research and development.

In any case, she wasn't able to fall asleep, so she decided to take a stroll and breathe in the clear air of dawn, in order to change her mood. She left the room silently so as not to wake up Elu who was sleeping close by.

As a matter of fact, Lifa really enjoyed morning walks, it was refreshing to her. But, her village was small, the people there mostly made a living through agriculture and raising livestock, so they generally started their day really early. There were many families that started moving even before dawn. When she went out in that period of time, Lifa, who was isolated in the village, stood out whether she liked it or not. She could only go out normally after sunset.

Lifa didn't have to live such a rigid life here. She was slowly going around the research center's premises at her own fancy.

At that time, her ears picked up the sound of wind being sliced. Lured by that noise, Lifa's feet changed path towards a sheltered place, separated from the research center.

There stood Harold, who was freely handling two swords of different shapes. It was captivating. Harold's sword handling was like a sophisticated dance that could fascinate any onlooker. When he killed the hydras, Lifa was too close so she wasn't really aware of what was going on, and above all, she had been so frightened by Harold's overwhelming strength that her mind couldn't catch up. However, looking at him fighting again, she realized how beautiful it was. It was the first time she felt the beauty of combat.

Lifa had no sense of how much time had passed. Her preeminent concern was just to watch Harold in fascination.

In the end, only when Harold's sword dance came to an end did Lifa come back to her senses. Harold put his two swords back in their scabbards at his waist with a cha-ching.

That was the signal that pulled Lifa back to reality, like a curtain coming down

on a stage she had been absorbed into. Then, she suddenly recalled her original purpose.

It was still early morning so there were no onlookers. It was the perfect opportunity for Lifa to have a talk with Harold without anyone overhearing them.

His training seemed to be over as well, so talking to him wouldn't be a hindrance. Thinking that, Lifa took her first step forward, and almost simultaneously, Harold casually took off his shirt, exposing his upper body. He wasn't trying to display his body, it probably felt gross to wear the shirt as it was soaked in sweat so he just took it off. He surely didn't expect that someone was watching.

However, Lifa was taken by surprise, and just like that, Harold's exposed upper body was suddenly neatly burned into her eyes.

Because Harold was tall, he appeared to be quite thin when he had his clothes on, but his body actually had no excess flesh at all, and his muscles were like a masterpiece of pure efficiency where flexibility coexisted with strength. His body was strong and yet elegant, as if it had been sculpted by hand.

Looking at this body of the opposite sex was just too much stimulus for Lifa, who had absolutely no experience with romance.

Her pulse jumped up. As she felt her blood rapidly rising, Lifa didn't have to look in a mirror to know that her face was currently bright red.

Harold's back was turned, so he hadn't noticed Lifa's presence yet. She had to leave immediately, for both their sakes.

Though she knew that in her mind, she couldn't take her eyes off Harold's well-trained body. She had no control over her body, it was like her feet were rooted to the ground.

And, at last, Harold turned around.

Their eyes met. Harold's deep crimson eyes shot right through Lifa. She had seen them many times so far, but right now, for some reason, she was entranced by those pupils that seemed to say "I don't care about you, scum." Lifa had no words. Despite all the thoughts she had a little while ago about having a talk with him, she couldn't say anything, be it greeting him or giving him an explanation about her staring at him. Her heart was beating fast, and

she just stood there, all she could do was to take slow breaths over and over again.

In contrast to Lifa's state, Harold's movements weren't affected when he noticed her presence. He came up to Lifa with his shirt hanging on his right shoulder.

Lifa's thoughts were boiling to the point where she couldn't even think about what to do or what was happening.

Harold finally arrived in front of her. Even so, he didn't stop walking, and the moment he passed by Lifa's side, he approached his mouth close to her ear and whispered. Perhaps due to the intense exercise he had just been through, Harold's voice had a warm feeling to it as it reached Lifa's earlobe.

"Did you take peeping as a hobby? How splendid of a so called genius inventor."

As Harold addressed her with his usual sarcasm, a shiver went along Lifa's spine. It wasn't fear, but another sensation she didn't know.

Harold left her with those words and went away as if nothing had happened. Left by herself, Lifa sat down on the spot as her knees gave away.

Strange. A strange thing she had never experienced before had occurred to her body. However, she didn't know the cause.

Even so, she was certain of one thing, and that was that she wouldn't be able to look straight at Harold's face for a while.

Translator's notes: Well, that was a new kind of fan service to translate for me, hope I didn't screw it up too much.

Also, I'd like to thank Muha.T for donating on my Patreon yesterday, and all the other patrons as well, of course.

If you want to donate as well, here is the link [Patreon](#).

Next chapter might be tomorrow since it's kind of on the short side, so be sure to check it out.

Chapter 59

(Harold's POV)

Lifa had been strange lately. That's the feeling Harold got, because the times he actually met face to face with her were decreasing drastically.

If that was it, maybe he'd have thought it was just a coincidence, but he doubted that since, whenever she saw him, Lifa would turn around and go back to wherever she came from. Maybe she was tired of his careless abusive language and took some distance.

The last time Harold had talked to her was a few days prior. At the time, he wanted to advise Lifa, who was observing his daily early morning training, by stealthily whispering to her "You should stop going out of the research center by yourself.". And, as usual, his words turned into sarcasm. Perhaps that was the cause of the current state of affairs.

Looking back on his behavior so far, his misconducts had just been accumulating so this result wasn't strange in any way.

There were no demerits to being disliked by Lifa, but unlike in Erica's case, there was no guarantee that Lifa would become an ally, therefore, Harold was worried that she'd switch sides and go with Justus. In the worst case scenario, Harold would have to consider taking her in his own camp instead of sending her to the main character's party.

To avoid this what-if scenario, Harold had been looking for solutions, and apparently, Elu knew the reason behind Lifa's change of attitude. Although Elu didn't want to get into the details for some reason, Harold was relieved to learn that the situation wasn't all that serious and would most likely not bring any harm to him.

At any rate, Lifa's change weighed on Harold's mind, so he really appreciated that Elu stayed with her since it considerably decreased his worries. Harold believed that as long as Elu was involved, he'd somehow manage. Elu was that reliable to him.

Especially in situations like the one that was currently happening, as he had to leave the research center to do a mission for Justus.

(..... Speaking of, just how far is the meeting place?)

A few days ago, he was called by Justus to get his new mission. It was nothing unusual. The unusual part however was that the task wasn't commissioned by Justus but by a third party.

Ever since Harold had been working under Justus, that was a first.

He hadn't been told where to go or what to do yet, but it seemed like, this time only, he'd be informed about the details directly from the client at the meeting place. Incidentally, Harold had been told beforehand that he couldn't refuse the client's demands.

And what startled him the most was a message that Harold received from Justus the previous night. Though that in itself was quite frequent, the strange part was the content of the message "Be careful not to use your power too much. Remember, you don't have that much longer to live, Harold."

That "power" probably referred to the sword made by Justus. That sword with the crystal embedded in it that, supposedly, absorbed the user's power, and cut down said user's life to grant him a herculean strength. By making Harold appear to be carrying that kind of risk, Justus convinced the higher-ups to disregard the danger Harold represented and make him a subordinate, but really, this was a pack of lies.

In the first place, what pushed the higher ups of the knight order and the members of the tribunal to come to the conclusion that Harold was dangerous were Justus' lies, therefore, he himself had no reason to be worried about that, for he knew it wasn't true.

So the message was likely made to be heard by a third party, and not Harold himself.

(Maybe someone intercepted it and Justus actually did this on purpose to turn the tables on that person?)

Harold cast his eyes down at the wristband-like device coiled around his arm. It was a terminal equipment, developed by Justus, that made it possible to send voices to another material with a similar source of magical power by attaching said material to an astral body. It appeared to be like some kind of substitution of science with magic, but when Harold asked Justus to explain how it worked, Justus laughed at him scornfully and told him that no amount of

detailed explanations would make him capable of comprehending this. That attitude really angered Harold, but he had no understanding of that kind of specialized knowledge, so he just let it go for the time being.

The device's system worked by recording the voice first and then sending it, so it wasn't possible to have a real time conversation with it like with a phone, and the more distance there was between the two terminals, the longer it took for the message to arrive. Be that as it may, in this world where telephones didn't exist, it was a ground-breaking invention.

What Harold was wearing was a test prototype. If Justus successfully commercialized this, his fame would rise yet again, and he'd make lots of money.

While he thought about this and that, Harold was being jolted around in a horse-drawn carriage.

Two whole days had passed since he left the royal capital. The sun was already halfway down the horizon, and as Harold was dejected, thinking the ride would keep going for the whole night again, the carriage started slowing down. When the carriage came to a complete stop, its door was opened from the outside.

"We've arrived. Get off."

The very unfriendly rider lowered the carriage's staircase. As Harold got off the carriage, he found himself in some sort of town square. The city's business district, or what looked like it, was thoroughly illuminated by the street lights and the lights at the store fronts, and even though the night was coming soon, the people were brimming with energy. However, Harold no memory of that town. Perhaps it didn't exist in the game's story, or perhaps it just wasn't part of the game's map. *(TIn: Was the game open-world?)*

"What's this place?"

"It's Kablan.】

Though the town hadn't come up in the game, he had heard of the name in his life within Harold's body. He didn't know if the term "provincial city" existed in this world's language, but when compared to the towns and cities scattered

across the country, save for the royal capital, this city was extremely well developed.

"What am I supposed to do here?"

"I wasn't told. My task was just to bring you here."

As he said that, the rider got on the carriage and quickly rode away.

Isn't this going a little too far? I have no idea where I am or what I'm supposed to do, I'm just stuck here. As Harold was at a complete loss about where to go...

"What's wrong? What are you just standing here for?"

Someone called out to him from behind.

Harold reflexively responded to that voice. In normal times, he'd have probably immediately realized who was calling out to him. That familiar voice brought a feeling of nostalgia in him.

"It's none of your fricking business you——"

Upon looking back towards the source of that voice, Harold was at a loss for words. He had an aghast expression, rarely ever seen on his face.

"It is kind of my business though. Or are you denying our friendship?"

"..... The hell are you doing here, Itsuki?"

The one who stood there was Itsuki Sumeragi, Erica's older brother, also known as Harold's only friend.



(Elu's Pov)

The next day after Harold departed for his new mission, the atmosphere in the research center was somehow calmer than usual. Perhaps that was due to Harold's absence?

Moreover, Lifa, who was now Elu's temporary roommate, had regained the composure that she had lost for several days. However, the implications of that were the complete opposite of what other people perceived.

It wasn't not that Lifa didn't want to see Harold, but rather that she didn't want to be seen by him. And Lifa herself didn't seem to realize the cause behind this.

(Who'd have expected this kind of development. It would be premature to call it love, but she's become really aware of him ever since that day.)

On that day, Elu found signs that Lifa had slipped out of her room, so he followed behind her without her noticing. That was to abide by Harold's instruction of not letting Lifa be by herself if possible, regardless of the fact that Lifa had simply went out for a stroll.

In the middle of her walk, Lifa happened to come across Harold, and, at that moment, she likely felt a strong sense of appeal towards the opposite sex.

Harold had a constantly displeased expression on his face and sharp eyes that could kill a person, yet he was attractive. Even by the standards of Elu, who had many male acquaintances, Harold's looks were top class.

He had good facial features and a well trained body. If he whispered something close to someone's ear while fully displaying those looks, it wasn't that weird for said someone to crumble on the spot, depending on the person. Moreover, it didn't seem like he did it intentionally.

Perhaps Harold was some sort of natural lady-killer. When Lifa and Elu visited the research center for the first time, Justus teased Harold about getting himself a second wife, but he wasn't necessarily off the mark.

And that's why Lifa's emotions had been in shambles up to now, but today was the day of the second meeting with Justus, which Lifa had been waiting for, so she seemingly managed to clear her mind of idle thoughts. She was very proud and in high spirits as she had, based on the gains from her first meeting with Justus, prepared new ideas for the second meeting.

Elu really wanted to learn from Lifa, who switched her mood so easily. As Elu observed her while thinking that, the time of the meeting came.

"Let's go, Elu!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Lifa, who had been constantly looking at the clock, tried to pull Elu out of the room by force. Elu, who wasn't particularly fond of being dragged on the floor, decided to follow her pace so that they wouldn't be late. There was no way he was going to let Lifa confront Justus alone.

However, Lifa seemed a little bit too passionate. She was certainly very eager to

learn, but maybe she was also desperate to get rid of the anomaly in her emotions, to which she still didn't know the cause.

Either way, Lifa was trying too hard. Though Elu gave her a warning just in case, he had to back her up so that she wouldn't give Justus any opportunity to take advantage of.

If he had to be honest, Elu didn't want to get involved with Justus more than necessary. Elu knew very well that it would be extremely difficult to get any information from Justus without exposing himself.

But making up excuses to not go, at this point in time, would be akin to confessing that something shady was going on. Justus' perception and thought process were far from average after all. He was basically a monster.

Which made it all the more ridiculous for Elu to willingly go to the man's office to wait for him. Elu jeered at himself. However, this was the job that Harold had entrusted him with, so he had no other choice than try his luck and deal with it.

And that's why, Elu came to Justus' office. However, when he knocked on the door, there was no response. Usually, he'd have been received by one of Justus' assistants, but it didn't look like there was anyone inside at all.

It was already past dinner time, and those assistants were dedicated to their research day and night. It was hard to believe that all of them, at the same time, had gone to sleep or eat.

"Oh? Is no one there?"

Lifa reached her hand to the doorknob without any hesitation. The knob soon stopped turning and the door opened with a clank.

When the two peeked into the room, there was no light, and not a soul in sight. However, upon a closer look, there was a dim light coming out of the door that led to Justus' personal laboratory. It seemed like Justus was inside.

Elu considered what to do. Normally, it would be fine to just go inside the office since they had an appointment. Even if Elu examined the office, and then later on insisted that he had just arrived, there would be no way to actually prove that he lied, moreover, if he managed well, maybe he could get some important information.

But this unusual situation was too advantageous for Justus. Harold wasn't there, and all the other researchers were out as well. If Justus

planned to do something to Elu and Lifa, this was the perfect opportunity for him. Considering that, Elu had to thread carefully, any mistake could bring back some severe retaliation.

Elu was hesitating. But in the end, the answer he reached was still to take the gamble.

Harold had warned Elu not to take any risks. However, Elu knew better than anyone else that, if he followed that warning, he wouldn't be able to draw any information from Justus. Justus was that strong of an opponent.

Although this was for his job, Elu didn't want to clash head on with that man. So far, he had taken a pretty big safety margin so as not to expose himself as being Giffelt, like Harold had told him to.

So why did Elu choose not to do that this time? That was because his mind wasn't thinking straight, he was too impatient to gather information. Had he been composed, Elu would not have made such a reckless decision.

The compensations Elu would get for cooperating with Harold were indications regarding the star memory. This star memory was a gathering of information that gave one the ability to know about everything in the whole creation, be it in the past, the present or the future.

Obtaining it was everyone's dearest wish in the Giffelt clan that was in a constant pursuit for knowledge and information. Elu wasn't sure this was true, but he had heard that the Giffelt clan came to be for the sole purpose of finding it.

And he feared that, if he didn't show himself useful to Harold, he would be back where he started, without a single clue about the star memory's whereabouts. Therefore, to gain Harold's trust, Elu wanted to get some useful information by any means necessary.

Elu put his index finger on his mouth to instruct Lifa not to make any noise. Once he confirmed that Lifa understood him, Elu very silently walked across the room. Lifa followed behind him timidly. She did quite well considering that she wasn't used to moving stealthily.

Inside the room, the two arrived before the door that led to Justus' laboratory. On the right, Elu approached his ear while being careful not to let his silhouette appear behind the door's blinds, and Lifa did the same on the left

side of the door.

And then, the two's ears picked up something.

"—— Be careful not to use your power too much. Remember, you don't have that much longer to live, Harold."

Harold didn't have much longer to live, that reveal was probably a merciless blow to Lifa.

Chapter 60

(Elu's Pov)

"What... does he mean?"

Muttered Lifa, while her agitation was plain to see. She couldn't understand the meaning of Justus' words.... No, she didn't want to understand. Looking at her acting like that, Elu realized he had made a mistake.

All he told Lifa was that Harold was a test subject for a certain research. The more detailed version however was that it was an experiment that consisted of amplifying the user's power by cutting down his own life. Clearly, it was an inhuman research.

And yet, Elu neither made that fact public, nor did he tell Lifa about it. That was because he didn't need to.

To begin with, that research was made under the tacit consent of the most powerful people among the higher-ups of the country and the country's government, just the fact that Elu knew about it was already a big risk, let alone publishing it. If he, instead of selling the information, made it public for the sake of someone he didn't even know at the time, he would have been basically throwing his life away. Elu didn't have that strong of a sense of justice, nor was he some sort of journalist that wanted to rebel against the power in place. Besides, if he did that, it would attract some unwanted attention. That would mean attracting attention on Giffelt as a whole just for his personal matter, which would have been an extremely foolish move.

And this wasn't limited to Harold's case. Elu considered the risk and returns, and he deemed that the returns just weren't worth it.

Elu had that way of thinking from long before, and when he actually became friends with Harold, he found out that Harold himself was trying to hide that experiment. He didn't quite get what Harold's aim was, but if that was what he wished for, Elu had no room to interfere.

Elu and Harold had a cooperative relationship. Elu couldn't go against Harold's wishes lest he lost his remuneration. Of course, that was assuming the pact he

had with Harold was valid, but Elu still couldn't confirm that at this point in time, so there was nothing he could do.

Therefore, even though Elu felt disgusted by that research, which played with Harold's life, he couldn't openly speak of it to anyone. Though he was aware that Lifa was in the process of falling in love for Harold, she was going to return to her village in a week's time. Elu thought Lifa would be separated from Harold before she even became conscious of her crush, and the two would never meet again.

He couldn't deny that this was a cold way of thinking for a friend, but he thought it would be better if Lifa didn't know about the cruel reality. The relationship between Harold and her was still frail, so it was better for everyone if the two ended their relation while Lifa still wasn't aware of her love. Especially if Harold didn't have much time left to live.

However, Elu's speculations had backfired in the worst possible way. Lifa would not be able to keep silent after hearing what Justus said.

"Try to bear with it for now, Lifa"

".... sorry"

As Elu expected, his whisper had not persuaded Lifa. There was no way for him to withdraw from here without pinioning Lifa and making noise, and to begin with, there was a chance that Justus had talked knowing that the two were present.

Elu feared that was the reason why the room was cleared out of people. He regretted having stepped inside so carelessly. But it was too late for regrets as Lifa flung the door to Justus' laboratory open without knocking.

"-!... How long have you been here?"

Justus looked surprised by Lifa and Elu's abrupt entrance. It was a natural reaction that didn't feel forced.

Though the whole situation seemed artificial, like it was set up in advance, Justus himself didn't seem like he was acting.

"I'm sorry, we were eavesdropping."(*Elu*)

"What did you hear?"(*Justus*)

"...That Harold doesn't have much longer to live"(Elu)

"I-it was a lie, right? He looks so healthy..... I saw him training the other day! He was moving at an inhuman speed..... S-So, for him to be close to death or whatever, it doesn't make any....."(Lifa)

"Calm down, Lifa."(Elu)

Lifa didn't know what to think, she was in denial, her voice was shivering as she desperately uttered pointless words. Elu gripped her shoulders and lightly shook her in an attempt to calm her down, but that had little to no effect. As he looked at the exchange between the two, Justus let out a sigh.

"Please sit over there. It looks like we all have things to ask each-other, so I'll treat you to some tea."

Justus stood up and poured some black tea, which he had heated up beforehand, in three teacups. The mellow smell of tea leaves that filled the room was soothing to the mind. Partly thanks to that, Lifa somewhat regained her calm after a dozen minutes. However, she still wasn't in a state where she could speak calmly. Having noticed that, Justus turned towards Elu.

"Well then, I'll start with since you seem like you can talk properly. You two did some fine reconnaissance work there. You do know that was a crime, right?"

"Yes. We're very sorry."

Elu gave a deep bow. There was no room for excuses in this situation. If Elu didn't tell the truth and tried to eloquently deceive Justus, he'd be giving him a legitimate reason to suspect him. It was wiser to obediently apologize, and pass off the matter as a kid's mistake. Justus sighed again. He was scratching his head with his right hand, seemingly trying to calm his temper. Elu couldn't determine whether this was genuine or just an act.

"Well, I'll admit that I made a blunder, I was talking carelessly while I knew that you were coming to visit. But what you heard was a very important secret that can't be disclosed."

"A secret? Then that means..."

"Yeah, it's the absolute truth, Harold is going to die soon."

As Justus affirmed that, Lifa, who was looking down at the ground, controlled her voice. Elu could see her tightly clenching her hands on her lap.

"—— But why?"

She, who had been silent up to this point, asked urgently. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"Why is Harold going to die?" (*Elu*)

"Like I said, it's confidential. If I tell you it would be—"】

"Please tell us! Please...."

The tears were spilling down, after filling Lifa's eyes to the brim. And yet, Lifa raised her head, and looked straight at Justus. After a short while, Justus was the first to give in.

"Lifa, I'd like to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"You haven't spent that much time with Harold. At best, you've known him for two weeks. So why are you so concerned about him?"

Justus' question went straight to the heart of the matter. As she ascertained her own feelings, Lifa started speaking her heart out while carefully choosing her words.



(Lifa's Pov)

"..... Harold often speaks cynically and has one twisted personality. Whenever we talk to each other, we end up quarreling, I don't know about him being the worst but I haven't heard any good rumors about him. However, he appreciates the magic I thought of. And, just to keep a promise he had with me, he fought without caring for the risks."

That made Lifa glad, but it also had a deeper impact than that. It made her wonder, "has there ever been a person who went that far for me?".

Lifa held doubts regarding magical powers from her early childhood. Why was magical power different from one person to another? Why were there people who couldn't use magic?

At first it was just pure doubt. However, as the years past, and as she acquired more and more fresh knowledge and values, her doubts turned into a dilemma.

Those who could use magic were rich, those who couldn't were poor. Those who could use magic were strong, those who couldn't were weak.

These weren't absolute truths, but most people went by them. That created disparity, as the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. And Lifa's village was not spared from that.

The farmers who were able to use earth magic and water magic were more efficient at growing crops than the farmers who couldn't. That was because the magic drastically decreased the labor needed to plow and water the soil. As the work needed decreased, the same went for the cost of labor, which in turn led to a decrease in prices. Between two products of similar quality, people would always pick the cheapest. Moreover, using magic instead of man power could finish the job faster, granting the magic users some free time to do other jobs. And like that, the disparity became bigger and bigger.

Be it in agriculture, hunting, raising livestock or even manufacturing, the people who possessed magic that fit their jobs were blessed with a better life than the ones who didn't. Getting a promotion because one's magic was superior was a common occurrence.

"The right person in the right place", perhaps that's all there was to it. But the issue was that, Lifa and her parents didn't have any talent with magic. She did have magical power but she lacked the ability to use it properly. Even though she didn't want to accept it and worked hard to change that, in the end, she still couldn't handle magic.

Therefore, Lifa's family was poor and went through many hardships.

Fespite those circumstances, Lifa did not stop thinking about ways to break the status quo. And then, one day, she finally hit on a solution.

If she couldn't use magic by herself, maybe she could use it by other means. And so, she came up with the idea of using magic with the support of science.

She believed that, if she could accomplish this, she would be able to help her parents and the many people that couldn't use magic. With that in mind, Lifa devoted herself to her research, day and night, to the point of neglecting sleeping and eating.

Before she noticed, Lifa had been labelled as an eccentric by her village's people, and her parents gave up on her, treating her like a good-for-nothing. She became solitary.

No one acknowledged Lifa's efforts. But that was no wonder. Lifa's idea was too far apart from this world's common sense. From her surroundings' perspective, she was just a foolish girl, desperately trying to achieve her impossible dreams. At the time, Lifa wasn't even ten years old yet, so she probably came off as being bizarre.

After that, Lifa persisted with her research. She kept on putting more and more effort into it, until it became her reason for living. She didn't know anymore if she wanted to help the people who were suffering or if she just wanted to triumph over those who gave up on her. Perhaps she just wished to leave behind proof of her hard work. That is why she was glad when Harold qualified her magic as an "Excellent means of attack", though there was some cynicism mixed to it. But even though he wasn't being totally sincere, he really did find some usefulness to Lifa's research, thus why he put her in contact with Justus, so that said research could progress even further. Thanks to that, Lifa was confident that her magic would ascend to a whole new level.

"I can't thank Harold directly, but one day, I'm going to repay his kindness without fail. Or rather, that's what I wished, so why....."

"Why is Harold going to die" she wanted to say, but she swallowed back those words.

She couldn't possibly tell all those lines to Harold face to face. She did wish to express her gratitude, but she wasn't able to be frank in front of him. However, she sincerely wanted to become more honest in the future.

"Even if everyone thinks of Harold as a bad man, he's important to me."

Therefore, if he doesn't have much time left, I want to do whatever I can for him."

Harold was going to die soon. Just imagining that was unbearable to her, it made her feel at a loss and made her chest tighten. She hadn't noticed but Harold's existence had taken a huge place within her heart.

Lifa wiped her blurred field of vision with the cuff of her sleeve.

"I don't want to see him pass away without knowing anything about him...."

Perhaps she was just being selfish.

However, that was truly how she felt.

"Haah..... he's really one sinful man. Just what is so good about that guy?"

(Justus)

Justus muttered in exasperation while sipping his tea. He sat up straight on his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

He kept pondering and hesitating in that same posture for a short while, and then, he sighed in resignation and started talking.

"You absolutely must keep this story to yourselves.... Actually, scratch that. You can't tell anyone about anything that you have heard or will hear in this place today. I will tell you about the secret that guy carries on his shoulders."

Chapter 61

(Lifa's Pov)

"Is that alright?"

Asked Elu doubtfully. Perhaps he was suspicious as Justus was willing to confess after claiming it was an important secret.

Though Lifa really wanted him to talk, she was also wondering if that was really fine.

"I'm not going to say I'm being driven by emotions or whatever. It's just that it doesn't matter whether I talk or not as there is no record of anything that I'm going to say in anyone else's memory. If you're afraid to listen, we can end it here."

What Justus said was sophistry but it was probably the truth. It wasn't likely that Lifa's feelings had reached him.

However, not listening was not an option for Lifa.

"Please hold back on the threats... Lifa won't give up no matter what you say. And I won't let her deal with this by herself so it's the same for me."

"Thank you, Elu."

Lifa was grateful to Elu for resigning himself and consenting to this. It was obvious that Elu thought it would be a bad idea to let Lifa listen to Justus' story in her current condition. Elu was probably worried Lifa wouldn't be able to handle the risk of knowing highly classified information.

And yet, knowing that, he went along with Lifa's selfishness.

"Then, let's talk. Harold and I crossed paths five years ago."



(Justus' Pov)

The first time Justus heard of Harold, he was working for the research center and had gone to the Royal castle to report on his study's progress. There, he happened to overhear a group of knights who were chatting with each other.

"I heard someone recently joined the knight order by taking some special test, instead of going through the normal procedures." "He probably has connections with some higher-ups, right?" "No no, I heard he one-sidedly knocked down dozens of recruits in that special test they made for him." "That's just because those recruit were weak." "I can't deny that, but that newcomer is just a 13 year old kid. He's the youngest genius to ever enter the knight order." "You mean he's better than the vice captain?" "What kind of monster is that?" "If I remember right, his name was Harold Stokes..."

They were saying various things about a boy who had become a new recruit. Because of his uncaring personality, Justus would have normally erased these trivial things from his memory after leaving the castle. The reason Harold's name remained in Justus' mind at the time was because of one sentence.

"You mean he's better than the vice captain was?"

Those words came from one of the men in the group, who was just pointing out a mere possibility. It wasn't so easy to compare this Harold boy's strength with the strength Vincent had when he was 13 year old. However, there was still a chance that the boy would exceed him. The knight hadn't brought up that possibility for argument's sake, nor was it a figure of speech, he genuinely believed it could happen. That was unbelievable to Justus, for he was Vincent's acquaintance and knew about his out of the norm battle power.

In the first place, for someone to even be compared to a great figure like Vincent, he or she had to be abnormal.

Vincent was strong. And that didn't only mean fighting strength, for he had a mind that wouldn't yield to any hardships, a sense of justice that opposed all evil, and the kindness to hold out his hand to the weak. He was extremely reliable to his allies and stood like a mighty wall on the paths of his enemies. Even in other countries, there wasn't anyone else like him. He was what the world would qualify as a hero.

Therefore, Justus was curious about the boy who had a chance to become stronger than that Vincent.

I'd like to meet him some day. This thought crossed Justus' mind.

At a later date, Harold's name once again reached Justus, who was immersed in his research as always. Justus was completely cut off from his surroundings and wasn't aware of whatever was going on in the outside world, yet even he had heard of Harold's story as it was the hot topic in the royal capital.

Apparently, the boy had disobeyed his superior and deserted in the face of the enemy. But it turned out that it was just an act and Harold had actually betrayed the knight order, for he was a spy from the Sarrian Empire, who had handed them information which allowed their army to launch a surprise attack that led to great damages.

Although the knight troops had been cornered and were on the verge of annihilation, they had managed to exterminate the imperial forces thanks to the last minute intervention from the headquarters of the royal troops led by the supervision head, Harisson. At the same time, they had managed to capture the traitor Harold alive, even though he had been on the brink of death. Nevertheless, more than half of the patrolling troops of the knight order had either been killed or injured, and if the royal army hadn't been able to make it in time, the situation would have likely developed into a severe dispute between the Star Reader Stellar tribe and the knight order. There was no forgiving Harold, who had planned such a massive disaster, and he was eligible for the death penalty.

This is what was being said among the masses. Upon hearing of this, anyone would agree that it was natural for the situation to develop into Harold's execution. However, that was only if that story was true.

When he heard of this, the first thing Justus felt wasn't anger or even disappointment over Harold's betrayal towards the knight order. What he thought was that the situation was too unnatural and felt too orchestrated.

From what little he had heard, there were several points that caught his attention. He wondered how a 13-year-old son of an aristocrat could possibly become a spy for the empire, and he felt that the royal army's timing was too good. But what felt the most peculiar to him was how detailed the rumors were and how abnormally fast they had spread only a few days after the return of the expedition's troops.

Normally, the information would have been kept under control until the

situation could be sorted out and confirmed. Sorting out the situation didn't sound like much, but it took time, and many efforts from many people. It was strange for that process to end as soon as the troops came back. When he was arrested, Harold had been unconscious and in a critical state, his consciousness should have returned only a few days before the troops arrived at the royal capital. It was doubtful that he had been interrogated and had given all the information he had in that short time span.

The information could have been taken from the imperial troops prisoners, but it was hard to believe that all the prisoners gave the same testimony, moreover, examining the information they gave would have taken time and effort, but the expedition forces' hands were already full on their way home, as they had many dead and injured people to take care of.

Justus' conclusion was that the rumors had been spread intentionally and were very unlikely to be true. *Maybe Harold served as someone's scapegoat?* He thought.

But so what? Whether the rumors were true or not, it had nothing to do with Justus, and he didn't have an ounce of concern for the life or death of other people.

Usually, he'd have cast that story aside without a second thought. If he hadn't been concerned about Harold's potential going to waste, he would have definitely abandoned him. He likely wouldn't even have been aware that he was abandoning him.

It was luck that led Justus to get interested in Harold, it was luck that led him to hear the bad rumors concerning Harold, and it was due to luck that he happened to have a few connections among the knight order and the tribunal. Thanks to many coincidences overlapping with each other, Justus had the opportunity to visit and meet Harold. Well, he didn't really meet him, not face to face at least. He merely observed him from a distance.

It was at the dungeon of the royal capital's tribunal that Justus met him; a boy with black hair and red eyes, whose arms were chained to a wall.

He was Harold Stokes.

The first impression Harold gave off was that of a wolf. Proud, sharp, aloof, and trusting no one but himself. That was the general

atmosphere around him. He was imprisoned in jail, tied by chains, and waiting for his execution, but despite his hopeless circumstances, the fire in his eyes was burning without a glimpse of a shadow. His red eyes were like two crimson flames.

Before exchanging even one word with Harold, Justus was convinced: "Yeah, this guy's definitely not a spy." Harold looked as if, no matter the options presented to him, he'd always choose to stand true to his way of life. He seemed like he didn't even mind dying to preserve his beliefs. That was how powerful his eyes were.

Justus wondered if calling this "The aesthetics of the devil" would do justice to the boy. And he intuitively realized that it would be too regrettable to let such a gem die.

From there, Justus made his move very quickly. It had been a while since he had taken the initiative to take action for something other than his research. Through his work acquaintances, he tried to appeal to the country's big shots and influential people, one after the other, so that they would reconsider or delay Harold's death sentence.

However, Justus was just a scientist. Nobody was willing to carry the burden that came with accepting his demands. Therefore, he pulled out his trump card. Justus' purpose was to save Harold, but that trump card was basically a curse, a taboo experiment, developed by himself.

Then came his second meeting with Harold in the dungeon. Looking at Justus who appeared before him, the first thing Harold said was Justus' full name.

"Justus Freund....."

"Oh, do you know me?"

"Why would a man like you come here?"

"..... Right, I'll cut to the chase. If you don't want to just sit here and wait for your death, join me, Harold."

Justus didn't beat around the bush and went straight to the point. Harold glared right at Justus, as if trying to read the aim behind his words.

Justus knew this wouldn't be easy. While letting Harold scrutinize him with his eyes, Justus waited for him to speak.

"Bullshit. You're saying you can overturn my execution?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'll definitely overturn it."

Justus affirmed confidently. He wasn't bluffing, he was just that confident that the weapon he developed and his negotiation skills would be enough to free Harold.

If that weapon could be put to use, the kingdom would be able to get an invincible army. Nobody would hesitate to sacrifice one death-row prisoner for that. In addition, instead of killing him, Justus was going to use him, toy with him, torment him and then kill him, which would serve to relieve those who wanted Harold dead, too.

There would be very few people opposing this, so Justus wouldn't be put under any real pressure.

"However, I have to tell you. If you work under me, you'll fall further down in hell."

".... What do you mean?"

"I've developed a certain sword that I had to seal away because of one big defect that goes with it. It's a sword that rapidly rises the user's fighting power by absorbing his magical power. But it has a side-effect that cuts-down the user's life, eventually leading him to his death. If you're willing to wield that sword, I'll release you from here."

Justus was completely frank and didn't hide anything. Harold was given two choices.

Was he going to accept his death without resisting? Or was he going to die a short while later, in exchange of many more hardships? It was a ruthless choice to give. And either way, the end result was the same, death.

Justus wasn't going to claim that his conscience was hurting. If that had been the truth, he wouldn't have given those choices to Harold. Justus never had a virtuous mind, his principle had always been to act for his own interests.

".....heh"

"?"

"Hehehe..... Ahahahaha!"

Harold started laughing.

His voice sounded like it had come from deep in the abyss. His laughter was filled with evil, and would make any listener shiver. The much too out-of-place laughter continued to reverberate throughout the dim dungeon, showing no signs of stopping. It felt as if Harold had gone completely mad.

"..... What's so funny?"

Justus finally had the resolution to ask Harold, who was starting to look more like a devil to him. Thereupon, Harold suddenly stopped laughing, and the echo that resounded in the dungeon followed suit.

That silence was a radical change. Justus' palms were sweaty. Only when he noticed it was actually cold sweat did Justus realize the boy in front of him had mentally overpowered him.

"What's so funny, you ask? How could I not laugh?"

Harold answered while standing up. His arms were being pulled behind by the chains so he wasn't able to straighten up his back. Although he was on the verge of falling forward, his eyes did not separate from Justus.

The chains rang out in the dungeon's silence. Without a care for the fact that he was chained to the wall, Harold struggled to walk forward, as the chains' clash resounded even more.

"Further down in hell? Cut down my life? The resolution to die?"

The sound became louder and louder.

Blood started dripping from Harold's wrists, where the metal cuffs were attached. But still, Harold did not stop advancing.

"What the hell are you implying? Don't you fucking look down on me, Justus!!"

With one last loud sound, the chains were torn off at last. Harold took several steps and gripped the jail's fence with his hands.

The fresh blood from Harold's wrists splashed on Justus, staining his white gown.

"Hand over that sword, that power. I'll teach you what true resolution and true hell are, bastard."

".....Magnificent, what a perfect answer."

Harold and Justus smiled at each other. However, by no means were the two friendly with each other, for those treacherous smiles were akin to a mutual declaration of war.

Translator's note: Please do ask in the comments if you didn't understand something >< Also, if you liked the chapter, please consider donating on Patreon 😁

Chapter 62

After hearing of Harold's past and secrets, Lifa had returned to her room and was holding her knees. It was too heavy, the fate that Harold carried on his shoulders. She repeated many times in her head the story she had heard from Justus.

Especially the last thing he had said.

『By now, Harold only has a few years left to live, I doubt he'll live past his twentieth year. If he uses that power after this, his remaining time will become even shorter. 』

Harold was 18 years old. That meant he had only about two years left to live, even less if he wasn't careful.

Lifa had a hard time accepting that reality. She couldn't organize her thoughts or think of what to do.

"... Are you alright?"

"Elu.... I don't know what to do. How can I help Harold with....."

"Do you regret to have heard that story?"

"....I don't know..."

"I'm sorry. “】

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Because I knew. I knew that Harold's life was being cut down every time he fought."

"What?! Then, why didn't you stop him?"

"Do you think just anyone could stop him?"

"That's... You're right, but...!"

Elu knew. He knew and yet, how was he able to interact with Harold so naturally? How was he able to smile at him? Lifa wondered.

It was the same for Harold. Lifa didn't understand, how was he able to keep

fighting until now? There was no way he wasn't afraid to die, so how was he able to wield that sword so calmly?

Lifa's thoughts were entangled and she couldn't even organize her words .

"Just what... you... All of you make no sense...."

"Right. Perhaps, that's the right thing to feel. "】

Elu smiled sadly.

Being kind to Lifa, while she was in her present state, would do no good.

"Lifa."

".....What?"

"If you're thinking of stopping Harold, you had better forget it right now."

"But that's...."

There was nothing Lifa could do for Harold. That's what Elu's strengthened tone seemed to imply.

This behavior was so unlike Elu that Lifa had no choice but to realize how serious his words were, no matter how much it displeased her.

"This is the path that Harold chose. It's not a problem that people, who don't know his circumstances, should put their nose into."

"Then, are you just going to silently watch him die, Elu? I can't do that...."

"In that case, you shouldn't meet with Harold anymore."

"How can you say that?!"

Lifa yelled at Elu.

However, neither that nor her glare made Elu flinch. He was completely calm and just went on to speak nothing but facts.

"I told you I already knew Harold's secret from before, didn't I? But he didn't want me to tell you, or to tell anyone. He has his goal, and this is necessary to attain it."

"What is that goal?....."

"He didn't tell me that much. But it seems to be more important to him than his life."

But what could possibly be more important to him than his life? muttered Elu to himself.

How could he go so far? How could he accept death like that? What on earth was so important to him? Lifa had many questions, but couldn't think of any answers.

"Well then, it's time to sleep. Maybe your thoughts will be a little clearer with a rested mind."

"..... Yes."

Lifa entered her bed as Elu incited her to. The light was turned off and the room was covered in darkness.

However, the torrent of emotions in Lifa's mind left her no chance to fall asleep. Lifa rolled her body trying to protect her heart that felt like it was on the verge of being crushed. And then, the pure young girl, as if she were praying to god, spoke a single wish.

"Don't die on us, Harold....."



"Just go and die."

That was the first thing Harold told Itsuki. Itsuki, who was a picturesque friendly young man, was used to Harold's abusive words and easily warded them off.

"Happy to see you have lots of energy to spare. Do you want to drink anything?"

"No."

They were currently at a coffee shop in Kablan. Although the time was more fitting for having dinner, Harold thought he wouldn't be able to calmly hear out Itsuki and eat at the same time, so he found a suitable place and brought him there.

Itsuki, who was sitting on the opposite side of Harold, had a refreshing smile as usual. But to Harold, on the contrary, it felt agitating.

"Hurry and explain from the beginning."

"Well, simply put, I'm getting married."

"Oh?"

Harold's response seemed completely indifferent.

Even though things may have appeared this way, Harold actually wanted to congratulate him.

He was deeply moved to learn that Itsuki was finally getting married. Thinking of Itsuki's specs, he was a flawless character: he had a good face, a good personality, a good family, and to top it all off, he was good with the sword. It was rather surprising that he managed to stay celibate up until now.

If there was a flaw of his to speak of, maybe it would be his sister complex.

Which reminded Harold that, shortly before he entered the knight order, Itsuki and him had talked about each-other's marriages.

Itsuki had been too insistent, showing Harold with question about his marriage with Eirca. As one would expect, Harold couldn't tell Itsuki he was going to break up with Erica, so he dodged the issue by asking Itsuki about his marriage. Itsuki had crossed his shoulder with Harold's telling him "Soon, we'll be brothers", at that time, Yuno, who happened to be present and hear the conversation, had a smile that put a lot of pressure on Harold, he still had cold sweats just from remembering it. It seemed like, despite being a beautiful woman, Yuno didn't have any romantic partner.

"The one who's to become my wife is the daughter of the head of this town. He decided to hold a party to celebrate the marriage before the family wedding."

"And so?"

"It's not that formal so my whole family doesn't have to be there. But I've been thinking of bringing Erica along to see her future sister-in-law."

"Can I leave?"

"The problem isn't with my relatives however, it's bigger than that. You see, there are many sons of aristocrats and merchants who are going to attend the party."

Itsuki kept talking as if he hadn't heard Harold's words. He completely

disregarded him.

Itsuki was perhaps the only one who could take such an attitude towards Harold.

"So you'll be like an insect repellent, sending away all the beasts that come courting my sister."

"Are they beasts or insects? Make yourself clear."

"They're beasts, but they look like no more than insects."

Itsuki boldly spoke that insult. Perhaps that image of a friendly young man didn't suit him that well after all.

However, there were more important matters to discuss at the moment.

"Why should I deal with something that troublesome?"

"Isn't it natural? You're Erica's fiance after all."

"What's the hell is wrong with your head? Did you forget I told you to cancel that engagement five years ago?"

"I remember that. I don't remember anyone agreeing though."

"Are you fricking....."

"All my father said was『I knew this day would come sooner or later. I guess there was no avoiding that. 』, but he didn't say he agreed."

That was certainly the case.

However, Harold thought that Tasuku, with how much he loved his daughter, wouldn't marry Erica to someone whom she was like cats and dogs with. He assumed that if Tasuku had a chance to break off the engagement, he would take it. Therefore, Harold thought that Tasuku meant "I guess there was no avoiding the cancellation of the engagement". Or rather, Harold convinced himself that Tasuku meant that.

If by "I guess there was no avoiding that." he meant "I guess there was no avoiding you making a request for a break off in the engagement.", then he hadn't actually clarified whether he agreed with the break off or not.

Harold was astonished as Itsuki took a sip of the coffee he had ordered. Itsuki took a breath, put the coffee cup back on its saucer and faced Harold

once again. Harold didn't know if his eyes were playing tricks on him, but he saw a vein appear on Itsuki's forehead.

"Really, you're way too selfish. You decide and do every single thing all by yourself. I mean, think about it, you could have been dead and we wouldn't even know. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the ones worrying about you. And even if we don't pull emotions into this, you let my father manage that farming method, which was your idea, all by himself, and now I'm the one who's going to get dragged into this. Well, I'm very grateful for that and I'm fully aware of how absurd it is to complain about it, but you definitely could have done a little more. Also, this is a good opportunity to tell you this: I don't have to listen to the selfish opinions of a selfish brat like you!

Even though you might have tried the break off thinking that the engagement would cause trouble to the Sumeragi family or something stupid like that, I'm sorry to say but we've already gotten our fire back, thanks to you. Like hell we'd have a reason to care about your bad reputation. Perhaps you think I'm being selfish right now? Like you're one to talk. I've decided to be as egotistical as you are. For my marriage, I was entrusted with some new responsibilities within the family. Among those was the responsibility of making the decisions regarding Erica's marriage. Fortunately, it wasn't specified in "that letter's wording that the person in charge has to be my father, so I think it should be fine.

I'll say it again, loud and clear. The next head of the Sumeragi family, Itsuki Sumeragi, will absolutely never acknowledge the break off of the engagement between you and Erica!"

Everyone was astounded: Harold, the coffee shop's clerk and even the shop's other customers. Be it from the very long sermon that Itsuki suddenly started in public, or that one declaration at the end. and Itsuki had been standing upright, mightily, and clenching his right hand into a fist. It was like an election speech. It was clear that Itsuki wasn't being completely careless as he didn't speak out Harold's name once in his whole speech, but he did speak the Sumeragi's name which was pretty much a hint. But in Harold's opinion, there were more important things Itsuki should have been careful about. Getting all the store's attention on himself was not something Harold was able to endure.

"I'm certainly thankful to you, but this and that have nothing to do with each

other. So, how about that? Think I reached the summit of selfishness yet?"

"Ugh... Are you a fricking kid?"

Itsuki had a smug expression on his face. His complaints were so childish that Harold couldn't find it in him to resent him in any way.

He had a hard time detecting any form of intelligence within Itsuki. Rather than getting angry, he felt worried wondering whether it would be fine for such an air-head to get married.

"Well, honestly, I'm aware of how weird I'm being, but I have to be at least this shameless to actually associate with you on equal grounds. After all, I don't particularly like getting pushed around by you."*(Itsuki)*

"Hah, in the end, no matter what you say, emotions will always drive your arguments with that competitive personality of yours. Erica is really pitiful, getting forced into an engagement by a twisted elder brother like you."*(Harold)*

"Huh? Did you just call Erica by her name? You really did, didn't you? I see, Erica, your relationship made some progress without your big brother knowing."*(Itsuki)*

(Ughh...! You're becoming like your freaking father!)

The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. However, Itsuki's responses were still quite different from his father's.

Although the difference wasn't that obvious, Itsuki had a way better skill for agitating people. Moreover, it wasn't an automatic and omni-directional skill like Harold's cynical behavior, but rather, Itsuki could aim that talent of his and adapt it to a specific target. Well, thinking about it normally, there was nothing weird about someone having manual control over his behavior, the strange one was Harold.

"But I guess it's no time for joking around. For the time being, you get what I meant to say, so I'll entrust you with the task of being Erica's insect repellent."

"I'm telling you this is not——"

"Here you go. This is the letter I got from that doctor."

Following those troubling words, Itsuki took out a piece of paper from his

chest pocket. Harold felt despair as he read through the paper, which basically said that Justus had entrusted all the power that he initially had over Harold to Itsuki until a fixed date. When he thought about it a little, Harold realized he had already been told beforehand that he had no right to refuse the client's demands, from the beginning, he never had a chance to escape from this ordeal.

Harold was in checkmate.

"That's just how it is."

"What did Eri... that girl say?"

"It's fine to call her by her name... Erica doesn't know you're coming. Even now, I told her I was going to meet with a friend and slipped out."

"What?"

"This is going to be a surprise."

It was a surprise indeed. Actually, if this wasn't a happy occasion as Itsuki was getting married, Harold might have exploded from how surprised he was. Though he wanted to get angry at Itsuki for pushing troublesome things onto him, Harold knew that this was a form of payback and he had it coming. Though he was annoyed by his mouth, but even if it weren't for that, he wouldn't have shifted the tone of the conversation at this moment.

"For now I'll have you stay the night at a nearby hotel's room that I booked for today. I'll come pick you up tomorrow before noon. We'll meet up with Erica and my companion later on."

"Hold on. Putting Erica aside, you want to introduce me to your fiancée, you utter moron?"

"Well, obviously, she's my fiancée."

"Stop. This is clearly a bad idea."

There was a very bad reputation that went with the name Harold stokes. If Harold were to one day get married to Erica, in a way, he would become a relative to Itsuki's fiancée's family. There was no doubt her family would do their utmost to avoid that possible future scenario.

Harold once again tried to persuade Itsuki to reconsider his marriage with Erica, because this time, if this were to become an obstacle to Itsuki's marriage, it wouldn't just itch his feelings, it would cause an uproar.

"Hmm, it could cause quite the riot if our guards slay every man that comes to challenge you...Oh, that's it!"

Itsuki clapped his hands as if to say he had hit on a great idea. And then, he dug up Harold's dark history.... Or rather, he made a suggestion to rewrite it.

"From tomorrow, you'll be Erica's fiancé, Lord.... Lord Strouse!"

Chapter 63

It went without saying by now, but Harold and Erica were natural enemies. That was because Harold was afraid that, if Erica's impression of him wasn't as low as possible, the story would likely deviate from the game's story which could lead to the annihilation of the hero's party. Then, it would become almost impossible to obstruct Justus' plans.

Moreover, Itsuki, who was Erica's elder brother, was troublesome as well. Harold hadn't met Itsuki for quite a while, and it seemed like somehow Itsuki's impression of Harold was as high as it could be, it was a wonder how it had risen that much. If Harold was told that Itsuki was just acting, he would immediately agree.

In other words, the Sumeragi siblings were powerful opponents, perhaps as dangerous as the last boss, Justus.

As Harold had these thoughts, he slowly raised his body. He felt like he just had a nightmare, but when he thought about it, the real nightmare would arrive with the events that were coming later that day.

He was thinking he didn't want to wake up, however when he looked at the room's clock, morning had already come and was approaching noon. He likely woke up that late because of the bad sleep he had at night. As Harold was sluggishly preparing himself, the sound of the room's knocker signaled him that a visitor was here.

That was a sign that the harbinger of Harold's nightmare had arrived.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"....."

As expected, when Harold opened the door, the one who appeared was Itsuki. Although Itsuki had greeted him composedly, Harold didn't have the energy to return his words.

He couldn't run away anymore. In that case, he'd rather empty his mind, neutralize his feelings, and get this over with.

"Seems like you're lacking sleep. I can see that you were so excited about

meeting Erica that you couldn't even sleep properly."

"And I can see that your eyes are damn useless."

Itsuki really was the best at triggering people for him to launch that blow from the get go. He had better be cautious because this could grow into a real fight if he didn't read the mood properly.

Harold couldn't help thinking of these kinds of trivial things to escape from reality.

"Hurry and lead the way."

"You're resisting less than I thought."

"It's in my principles to get done with troublesome things as quickly as possible. If I annihilate every man that comes to the party, this should end pretty fast."

"I see you're doing good today, too."

They checked out of the Hotel and left for the town of Kablan. It was already night when Harold arrived here before so he didn't get to check the townscape before, but the first thing that caught his eye was a waterway. It went through the whole town and many small boats were coming and going over it.

"Looks like the waterway caught your interest. Kablan is also called Lake-town, for the water actually comes from the mountains where ——"

Itsuki suddenly started giving a short lesson on Kablan. In short, Kablan was a town blessed with clear water. That waterway was spread throughout the whole town, and boats were a more common means of transportation than carriages. There was a famous saying "Kablan's babies learn to stir a boat before they learn to walk."

And certainly, currently, there were more boats to be seen than carriages. Itsuki proudly boasted about Kablan's splendor. Perhaps he wanted to think well of his marriage partner's hometown.

Afterwards, Harold and Itsuki chatted with each other while walking through Kablan, heading towards their destination. On the way, Itsuki suddenly put on a serious look and said "Hold on, does this mean that I've had a date with Harold even before Erica?" after which Harold almost instinctively pushed him into the

waterway.

Harold wanted to praise himself for his self-control that intervened at the very last moment.

In the end, Harold missed the timing to ask Itsuki the questions he wanted to ask, as the two of them reached their destination after around 20 minutes. This was the residence where Itsuki's marriage partner lived. Then, Harold remembered something important.

"Hey, what's the name of the woman you're getting married with?"

"Come to think of it, I didn't tell you. Her name is Sylvie Berlioz, the second daughter of the Berlioz family."

Harold recorded in his brain the minimum amount of personal data that he heard from Itsuki. It would be bad if he didn't know the name of the party's guest of honor. Though what he had to watch out for the most was his sarcastic mouth.

He decided to be as quiet as silent as possible in front of the officials of the Berlioz family. Ideally, he would just introduce himself and then not talk at all. In which case, he would be portrayed as a taciturn, unsociable, but still courteous man.

There were three days left until the end of the celebrations. He wanted to deceive them during that whole time period if possible.

"Then, let's go in, Lord."

"Humph."

Itsuki smiled lightly while emphasizing on the name "Lord", and he was clearly very happy with himself. Harold only humphed at him in response.

However, Harold was uneasy, wondering if it would really be fine to go in. There hadn't been any bounty rewards for Harold's head before so his personal description didn't really circulate among the public. Though his name and bad reputation were well known, few people actually knew his face. Even if someone recognized Harold, he wasn't a wanted criminal so there was no reason to catch or arrest him.

Nevertheless, Harold himself felt nervous as he went through the residence's door. That was the adverse effect that came from being subjected to hostile

looks every day.

Even if he forcibly gave himself a strong character, that didn't change the fact that, at the roots of his personality, he was a timid person. His instincts were telling him to turn on his switch, but he thought it would be dangerous to raise a storm of abuses in this place so he stopped himself.

Although Harold was worrying endlessly by himself, at this time, he was standing with the celebration's main guest, Itsuki, so there was actually no way the people of this house would be hostile towards him.

Itsuki was greeted by the mansion's employees whenever he passed by them. Everyone of them was cheerful and seemed delighted. Even if Harold was just watching from the side, he could see that Itsuki was adored and the felicitations the people gave him for his marriage seemed to come from the bottom of their hearts.

So, naturally, those employees were interested in Harold who accompanied Itsuki, but when they asked about him, Itsuki would instantly follow up with this "This is my friend, lord Strousse, he might look scary and not talk much but he's not a bad person." and Harold would just silently and mechanically salute them and keep walking.

The two repeated this set of actions several times as they advanced within the mansion. And then, Itsuki stopped his feet in front of a certain door. Apparently, Erica was there. Knowing that he'd have a hard time dealing with her, Harold felt tense, it had been several years since he had last met her. Without caring about Harold's worries, Itsuki knocked on the door.

"Erica, you there? It's Itsuki."

"Big brother? Please wait I'm——"

"Okay then, I'm coming in."

Itsuki was actually just checking if Erica was present. So, without caring much for the contents of her answer, he directly opened the door. However, while doing this, he moved his body to the side to make place for Harold.

The door opened smoothly without any interruption. Then, the field of view to the room was now wide open, which allowed Harold to see that a person was

standing there in the back.

She was wearing a kimono, colored in a cherry blossom pink, and her black hair was longer than in Harold's memory. She was also taller than before, as her young girl's body had now grown into a woman's body.

When the door opened, a gust of wind entered through the window facing it, and the woman's black hair silently fluttered with that breeze.

Her openly exposed skin was pure white. There was no dullness to that perfectly smooth skin, it was like a ceramic, be it the nape of her neck, her shoulders or her upper back, they were all blessed with a dazzling whiteness. It was captivating. Her body was so fascinating that it could bewilder hundreds of men all by itself.

It was only after the scene was saved in Harold's mind that he realized Erica's kimono was opened.

He had no time to think of how bad the situation was. Having sensed that the door had been opened, Erica, who had her back facing the door, turned around.

"Oh come on, I told you to wait——"



「お兄様？少々
お待ちくださ—」

Erica's sentence was interrupted once again. But this time, it wasn't because someone else interrupted her.
It was because her eyes met with Harold's.
Both of them solidified and turned into living statues. After a short pause, and

having seemingly understood the situation, Erica's face, no, everything from Erica's neck to her head turned scarlet red in the blink of an eye. The first one to get out of that stand-still was not one of those two, but Erica's attendant, Yuno.

"E, excuse me."

Unlike her usual self, she uttered but a few words. Yuno was probably in a big panic, too. Since he had been focused on Erica, Harold hadn't noticed Yuno's presence, but she had likely been helping Erica getting dressed up. Yuno stood up to cover the young lady's soft skin. She was in a hurry for she didn't want things to get any worse. While she very carefully arranged the Kimono, her feet got tangled in it and she fell down on the bed together with Erica.

"Kyaa!"

"M, my deepest apologies, Erica-sama..."

And so, Yuno's body completely covered Erica whose Kimono was still open, and whose chest area was dangerously exposed. Both of them were beautiful women. And Erica, who was thrown down, had her face turn red in shame. It was a spectacle right out of a yuri manga or novel. (*Tln: Yuri = Lesbian*)

".....I didn't know you had these kinds of hobbies, well, bitches do copulate in public."

That what came out of Harold's mouth when he tried to say "I don't mind two women being together as long as you're both fine with it.", he would, of course, have never willingly called them bitches. Harold was unable to bear this a second longer and closed the door, Itsuki had pushed him into a problematic endeavor as mercilessly as ever.

And Itsuki's words alone weren't going to have much weight in Harold's eyes as he was responsible for this whole situation.



"I'm sorry....."

Itsuki was now prostrating himself in front of Harold. He was apologizing to Harold and Erica.

It was hard to believe that man in such a miserable state was really getting married.

Contrarily to Harold who couldn't talk out of amazement, Erica's silence came from her anger. Incidentally, before Itsuki prostrated himself, Erica tidied herself up and attacked him with her palm. She expressionlessly had drawn closer to him and hit him with a powerful blow on his back. It made a frightful sound.

She probably held herself back from hitting him on the cheek and chose his back instead because of the party that was coming. It would be unsightly if there was a deep red mark on the bridegroom's cheek. Though it would make for a good laugh, it would be no laughing matter for Harold who was anxious to keep things close to the original work's story.

"Soo, I've reflected on my mistakes, can I get some recovery magic on my back or...."

"Did you say something?"

Erica's voice was cold. Moreover, her eyes, that were looking down on Itsuki, were becoming cold as well.

It was if she was looking at trash. It was unbelievable that Erica, the incarnation of kindness, could have these kinds of eyes.

Though Harold wanted to agitate Itsuki ever more by saying "You're even worse than those insect-like beasts you want me to chase, you're a freaking garbage-insect.", he decided to stay away from the subject in fear of redirecting Erica's wrath to himself.

"Stop bothering me. You're wasting my time."

"B-but look, I have to introduce Harold— I mean, Lord, to Silvi, right? Right?"

The elder brother was sucking up to his little sister. It was truly miserable. And perhaps because she had taken pity on that brother's misery, Erica finally calmed her anger.

"Please don't ever do this again."

"Yeah. I swear to god."

"Hah, seriously... stand up. Your clothes will get dirty."

"Damn it hurts..... you're way too cruel with me."

"Ever heard of the saying, 'you reap what you sow'?"

"I've never heard of it. Maybe you're referring to the saying 'getting pennies from heaven'?"

"They say the buddha will turn the other cheek as much as three times, I wonder if that applies to a normal person, what do you think, big brother?"

Erica was smiling but her eyes and voice showed otherwise. This time, Itsuki's face turned blue. Harold was wondering whether Itsuki would turn green or yellow next.

As those disturbances occurred, the time had finally come to meet the owners of the mansion, the Berlioz family.

Even though the pain in his back made him walk awkwardly, Itsuki led the group to a banquet hall in an annex building that was connected to the main building by a pathway. It was the main location for the celebration and it seemed like the Berlioz family was there.

In any case, Harold once again reminded himself to stay as silent as possible. But that resolution of his was crushed only a few seconds after he entered the hall.

"An opening!"

An attack. With a yell, someone jumped out from the shadow of the hall's opened door. In his hand he was holding a weapon that was shaped like a sword. This was the person's chance to attack as Harold wasn't currently carrying a weapon. This sudden visit would put him in a predicament. And so the blade attacked Harold.

Chapter 64

It was an almost perfect surprise attack. The weapon's swing was sharp, too, making it hard to defend against it, let alone avoid it. That's what Harold concluded before the blow reached him.

What's with that? If it's at this level then—

Though from anyone else's point of view, avoiding this would have been problematic, for Harold, it was so slow it could make him yawn.

All he did was take a sort of dance step and move back the right half of his body. And yet, the opponent's weapon only sliced air.

Looking at it more closely, the assailant's weapon was a wooden sword.

Although it was powerful, it didn't have much potential for killing, and judging from the slash's power, Harold felt it was no threat to him.

The opponent who had raised the sword above his head and attacked the air had dangerously exposed himself, making it easy to neutralize and restrain him. He was falling forward, and in his current stance, he could only see Harold's foot.

That was because Harold kicked the man's hands, which were holding the sword, with his left foot. The assailant sword flipped and flew away while he let out a loud groan of pain. He reflexively raised his face that was distorted from anguish.

He seemed to be around fifty years old, but his stern features and his Lincolnic beard probably made him look older than he really was. *Well, knowing the opponent's age isn't going to be of much use here*, thinking that, Harold continued his pursuit of the man.

Harold pulled back his kicking foot like a pendulum, and struck the opponent's shoulder with his heel. Even though Harold adjusted his strength, it should still have been painful, yet the man, with his robust muscles, managed to resist. But as a price for that, his muscles became momentarily stiff.

Though he felt some admiration for that surprising strength, Harold used his left leg, that was on the man's shoulder, as a fulcrum and somersaulted in the back to catch the sword that he had kicked up. He adjusted his posture in the air and

slightly leveled it down as he swung the wooden sword downward.

The man, who finally got rid of his muscles' stiffening, crossed both of his arms over his head in an attempt to defend himself. *Still, if he blocks this attack, his arms will get smashed.* While Harold had that thought, the wooden sword's slash met with a solid resistance and was stopped in its track as a metallic clank resounded.

Through the gaps in the man's now thorn clothes, a brilliant material could be seen. It seemed like there was sort of gauntlet concealed in his cuff, like a ninja. Perhaps that battle style was what suited the man better despite his robust build.

However, even though he blocked the blow, the impact was still there. Unable to bear it, the assailant tried to retreat as his guard had been broken, but Harold kept pursuing him, not giving him a chance to escape. As he grabbed his neck and pulled him towards himself, Harold hit his knee into the man's abdomen.

"Ugaah!"

The man spit out a muffled voice mixed with saliva. While thinking that was flithy, Harold caught the man's right wrist with his left hand, and his head with his right hand and, using his innate speed as a propulsive power, he drove the man into a wall.

Boom! A terrific noise resounded.

That was a decisive blow. The man, whose whole body was stuck on the wall, clearly showed no resistance, and when Harold let go of him just to check, the man slowly slipped down from the wall and only the white of his eyes was showing. The wall behind him was caved in, and there were some cracks on it as well. No matter how tough he seemed, he wasn't able to resist that blow. However, although he had repelled the assailant, Harold still had one simple question.

"Who's this guy?"

In the banquet hall that had turned completely silent for some reason, the one to answer was Itsuki.

"..... That man is Aurelian Berlioz. The current head of the Berlioz family."

"....."

Harold was at a loss. Not only the assailant was actually the current head of the Berlioz family, but Harold had also mercilessly beaten down that very same family head.

However, if what Itsuki said was true, that gave rise to another question.

"Oh, in other words, that completely savage display just now was the Berlioz family's way of welcoming their guests?"

Although Harold knew that there was no use questioning the attack if his identity had been exposed, he had to try asking for the sake of his safety during his stay. While he was preoccupied with that, his usual sarcasm manifested itself, to his dismay.

"Excuse us for letting you face that dangerous situation. Please let me say I'm sorry in my foolish husband's stead, I cannot apologize enough."

Saying so while lowering her head, completely unperturbed by Harold's sarcasm, was an intellectual-looking mature woman, who was a perfect fit for the word "madam". She seemed to be Aurelian's wife, as she had pointed at him while calling him her "foolish husband".

Next to her was a woman with light blue hair who appeared to be in her twenties, and then, clinging to the madam's waist in vigilance was a young girl who seemed to be wary of Harold. Perhaps one of them was... Or rather, surely the former was Itsuki's marriage partner. Harold tried not to think of the possibility of it being the latter.

The three of them showed no sign of being worried about Aurelian, as if it didn't matter what happened to him. It was pretty pitiful for the central pillar of the family.

After that, Erica, who was the party's healer in the game, used recovery magic to heal Aurelian. It seemed like she had grown up in more ways than one. While looking at Erica conjuring her spell, Harold was in such great delight that he couldn't help but let out an "Oh....." of admiration.

Incidentally, Aurelian's first words when he came back to his senses were "To lead me by the nose so easily, I like that!". Which went to show that Harold made a good impression on Aurelian's muscle-brain.

According to him, his assault was just a way to ascertain the abilities of a promising young man. Naturally, Itsuki had been attacked before as well, and it seemed like he had dealt with it splendidly. That was likely how things had progressed up to Itsuki's marriage with Sylvie.

Even though Harold was more of the opinion that the man was just being a nuisance.

Currently, everyone was having lunch around a round table following the suggestion "Shall we have lunch at last?" made by Sylvie, who was indeed Itsuki's marriage partner, as Harold expected. There wasn't that much food for lunch since the meals for the celebration that would start in the evening were being prepared.

Having overcome the hurdle of the first self-introduction, Harold tried to somehow sink into the atmosphere, but that was not counting on Aurelian, who was on his left, and Itsuki, on his right, who made it complicated for Harold to be left out.

"However, I didn't think you had a friend like Lord, Itsuki."

Said Aurelian while stroking his Lincolnic beard that seemed to be his pride. Though Harold was calling it Lincolnic, there was no Lincoln in this world, but he didn't know what else to call it.

"Is it that surprising?"

"Well, rather than that, nowadays, the young ones tend to be weaklings. So I really appreciate seeing two strong young men full of spirit like you and Lord."

"Thank you very much."

"....."

With a smile, Itsuki thanked Aurelian who was nodding to himself. As for Harold, he stayed silent as if this was unrelated to him. Aurelian had apparently assessed that Harold was full of spirit from that one interaction with him. Harold had a hard time understanding how that muscle-brain's train of thoughts worked.

"I can get my mind behind Itsuki's strength as the Sumeragi family has a lineage of fighters, but does the same apply to your family, Lord-san?"

However, his voiceless resistance was useless with Aurelian's wife, Brigitte, who asked him a question that he could not answer to with his mouth closed. Knowing that Itsuki would intervene if needed, Harold steeled himself.

"It has nothing to do with my family. It's my own talent."

He meant to say it came from his efforts in his training, but the word "efforts" was turned into "talent" when it came out of his mouth, as one would expect from the arrogant Harold Stokes. Well, talent was quite a fitting term as he had a highly powerful body that would grow stronger and sooner than an average person's body, even if he did the exact same training as them.

The troublesome part however was that the word "talent" had not escaped from Aurelian's attention.

"Talent, you say! Lord, how long have you been wielding a sword?"

"For eight years."

"From when you were ten, then? That's pretty late compared to the other strong people I know. So calling your strength a talent is no lie."

"Naturally."

"By the way, what kind of training did you do back then?"

"Yeah, I'd like to ask that, too."

Itsuki took advantage of the conversation. Looking at Sylvie and Brigitte, they seemed to be interested as well. As for Noelia, the third female of the Berlioz family, she seemed to be indifferent, as she was next to Erica, playing with her and keeping her busy. Harold wished she would stay like that for the next three days. That would greatly reduce his work and hardships.

"I didn't do anything special. I'd just swing my sword when I had some free time and hunt monsters."(*Harold*)

"He used to do lots of reckless things before and he'd become all worn-out. One time I was really surprised as he just showed up with a broken bone."
(*Itsuki*)

"Oh my, that must have been rough."(*Brigitte*)

"Sounds painful...."(*Sylvie*)

"I used to go through the same kind of reckless and absurd ventures back in the days. I think Lord and I will really get along!" (*Aurelian*)

Nope, not gonna happen, Harold was thinking in his mind. Though Harold had nothing against hot-blooded people, he preferred to keep his distance from Aurelian as he was way too extreme for him.

"However, it's indeed not a special training. You said you did it in your free time, but how long was that?"

When Aurelian asked that, Harold recalled the time when his consciousness came to this world. Though there were various things he had to do and think about, he was just a child therefore he was free most of the time.

He did that training driven by the obsession that he had to be strong for his future, and it also served as a way to let out the stress and anxiety from the many problems he had to face. Moreover, his enjoyment from being able to actually use the game's skills played a large part in motivating him.

Anyhow, even though he didn't have the same unlimited supply of stamina at the time as he did now, from his memory, he spent literally all of his spare time training back then.

"I didn't have a clearly defined schedule, but usually it was about ten hours a day, I guess?"

"..... What?"

That was everyone's reaction except for Noelia. It seemed like Erica had been listening in as well while she looked after Noelia.

Hold on, shouldn't Erica have found out about this when she was staying at the Stokes' mansion? Although Harold thought that, at the time, Erica had basically just been staying indoors, and Harold was also hiding his training since he was mindful of the public eye. When he thought about it, even if someone happened to see him, there would have been no one eccentric enough to watch him train for ten hours straight.

"Ten.... Ten hours? Out of twenty-four hours?"

"I'm pretty sure that's how days work, yeah."

Despite his blunt answer, Harold could understand Itsuki's confusion. Even

Harold would think of a person who trained ten hours a day as being insane. However, had absolute reasons why he had to get strong: so as to straighten his abilities, make his body able to swing the sword as long as he liked, and above all, so as to push death away. That was why he could achieve such a feat. He wondered what kind of reactions he would get if he told them that now, his training time had ranked up and would last 12 hours a day on average. Harold just had way too much time to spare when he didn't get any tasks from Justus.

"Apparently, there is a difference between our definition of the word "special" and Lord's."

"If you think that, it just means your abilities are limited, bastard. "】(※ "No, that's not how it is" is what Harold meant to say)

The air all around them froze down. Harold had called the head of the family a bastard right to his face.

Aurelian's shoulders were trembling. And then, he slowly stood up, looked up to the sky and shouted.

"Shame on me! Just because I can't do it, I drew the conclusion that it's impossible to do, how narrow-minded of me. It would be extremely foolish of me not to pick a prodigy like Lord!"

He was not angry. Harold couldn't help but admit that he had underestimated that muscles for brains' "strength equals a person's worth" thinking process. However, that didn't change the fact that situation was extremely troublesome. And so, Aurelian, who was shouting a lot for a while, regained his calm. He then used his rugged hands to grab Harold's shoulders, and asked him with a serious look on his face.

"Lord, won't you take Noelia as your wife?"

"Looks like there is something seriously wrong with your head."

Even though Harold had answered by reflex to those words that were beyond his mind, he didn't think he was in the wrong. For him, the wrong thing was whatever was going in Aurelian's head. Harold just couldn't understand the mindset of a person who had muscles for brains.

Noelia, who was eight years old and was suddenly going to be pushed into a marriage, also raised her voice in protest.

"I don't want to become Lord's wife! It's scary!"

"I'm the one who should say that, like hell I'd want this. Getting married to children is no hobby of mine."

"Don't worry. She might be too young right now, but I guarantee you that, in ten years, she'll turn into a beautiful woman."

Noelia was certainly a beautiful girl, taking Sylvie and Brigitte as a precedent, Noelia would likely become a beautiful lady in the future.

However, that was not what Harold was referring to when he said he didn't want this. And he was starting to feel more and more irritated.

"If you want, I'll arrange a room for you in the mansion, then with Noelia you can...."

"...Shut up."

"You don't have to worry about convincing your family. I'll take care of it."

"Shut up."

"You'll even get to be Itsuki's brother, that's not bad if you....."

"I told you to shut the hell up! I have——!"

As Harold faced Aurelian who was joyfully offering to engage his daughter to him, his blood instantaneously rose to his head. For a moment, he was enraged. However, even if it was short-lived, that rage was proportionally strong.

Everyone was overpowered by Harold's anger.

Even Harold himself was at a loss for words once he got back to his senses, after standing and shouting. And it wasn't because he let his feelings take control of him for a moment.

He was shocked, and perhaps even depressed, because of the words that almost came out of his mouth.

—— I have Erica.

Before he noticed, his eyes had turned towards Erica. And Erica's eyes met with Harold's as well.

She's my natural enemy. I just can't deal with her. That's why her eyes make my mind so restless. Harold was desperately trying to rationalize the situation.

"Ugh, I feel sick."

While everyone was shocked still, Harold averted his eyes and went to escape from the banquet hall with those sharp parting words.
In any case, right now, he needed some time and space to calm himself down.

Chapter 65

(Erica's Pov)

After Harold's departure, there was an awkward atmosphere within the banquet hall. But, despite his incongruous behavior, there was so much power behind his threatening attitude that nobody seemed willing to blame him. In the middle of that whole ordeal, Erica had seen the look in Harold's eyes. It was a look of deep, deep despair.

Then there were those words that Harold was about to speak. Guessing from Harold's nature and his speech and behavior so far, finding the continuation of his sentence was but a natural deduction.

— I have no need for things like a fiancée.

He had likely started saying that.

Though Erica couldn't think of why he hesitated to actually say those words, she believed it had something to do with the hopelessness that was reflected in his eyes.

"I am extremely sorry. Please allow me to apologize for his impoliteness."

Itsuki bowed his head to Mr. and Mrs. Berlioz. On the other hand, the couple told him there was no need to fret over it.

"It's fine. It's my husband who went and said something insensible. Rather, Aurelian should be the one Apologizing."

"Mhm, certainly, I didn't consider Lord's feelings. Perhaps he has already settled on a companion?"

"That's..."

Itsuki hesitated to talk as he stared at Erica with sidelong glances. And Aurelian seemed to have guessed something from that.

"Could that companion be you, Erica? If that's the case, then allow me to apologize to you, as well."

Well, it was natural to have that thought after looking at Itsuki's reaction. The

Berlioz family knew about the story from five years ago regarding a boy named Harold who demanded to break off his engagement with Erica.

However, they did not think that the young man they had been talking to just before was the very same person as that boy, which is why they came to the conclusion that Lord was Erica's new fiance.

They were correct, but they were also wrong. And Harold would have certainly preferred to reply that they were wrong.

"There is no need to apologize. Lord and I are not in that kind of relationship."

Which is why Erica answered that. She decided not to look at the sad expression on Itsuki's face.

But still, her heart was aching.

"Then, does he have someone else?" *(Aurelian)*

".....I haven't heard about that. Although we've been associating with Lord for a long time, he's not one to talk much about himself." *(Itsuki)*

Indeed, Erica didn't know what was really going on in Harold's mind. Of course, Itsuki and Erica had heard the bad rumors about him, but they did not believe them.

He was often misunderstood because of that behavior of his... Or rather, he made people misunderstand him on purpose.

He took on the disgrace of being a murderer so as to save a parent and her child, he acted in a way that would make Erica hate him so that she could cancel her engagement without having to worry, and he put his life on the line, killing the country's enemies, in order to save many members of the knight order and the Stellar tribe. The result was Harold's current situation.

He was treated way too unjustly. Still, there were many things he could have done to prove his innocence, and yet he didn't, so Erica and Itsuki had to respect his choice.

"He's a mysterious person." *(Brigitte)*

"You can say that. But, he's not a bad person. He's willing to stand up for other people and to fight for the sake of protecting them." *(Itsuki)*

"Now that's a real warrior! Next time, I'd like to have an actual formal bout with him." *(Aurelian)*

"Right, but there is no fighting halfheartedly against him. Actually, I have..."
(Itsuki)

Aurelian once again got excited. Itsuki, who had had proper bouts with Harold, started talking about their fights.

And like that, the awkwardness in the air vanished.

However, there was still a little anxiety remaining in Erica's heart.

Harold's pupils reflected such a strong despair. She had never seen him have those kinds of eyes before.

At the time, Erica had the illusion that Harold was grovelling in the face of his own destiny. Of course, that was nothing more than an illusion. She was likely just worrying too much.

However, Erica didn't only know about Harold's strength, she also knew he had ordinary weaknesses. He was constantly fighting against his inner weaknesses, and it's for the sake of stepping over those very same weaknesses that he was so strong.

That was Harold's way of life. He fought off his weaknesses, he fought off people's evil ways, he fought off monsters, and then, he fought off the world. Erica felt that, perhaps even she was Harold's enemy. Which is why she believed he was seeking power excessively.

Training for ten hours a day starting from his childhood was just not normal. In other words, something was pushing Harold to do so without fail.

As if fate had forced him to fight from birth.

(... As if the idea of fighting off everything had been "planted" inside his brain.)

Those words intuitively went through Erica's mind.

She could picture the seeds of fate, which were quarreling within Harold, as they were about to blossom. That terrible picture made her shiver.

No way. That couldn't possibly happen, right?

But still, that unpleasant image was now stuck to her mind and just wouldn't come off.

She was worried because of how much she cared about Harold, and how little she knew about him. She was worried because she did not know how Harold

felt, or what he thought.

In that case, she knew what she had to do. And even if Harold didn't want it, even if he would hate her for it, she believed that, if it could benefit him, she had to do it without hesitation.

No matter how unfavorable the results would be for Erica herself.



Although Harold had rushed out in spite of himself, he couldn't just wander inside a stranger's home. Having said that, despite having rushed outside, he remembered that he might get lost as he was not familiar with the place. Therefore, in the end, he simply covered a distance from which he could keep the Berlioz family's mansion in his line of sight. He was currently resting his elbows on the handrail of a bridge that went over the waterway.

(Damn I screwed up....)

He had heard criminals on television before claiming "My blood just rushed to my head for a moment.", and now, he felt like he could understand what they meant. Of course, just like them, he was "regretting and reflecting". As Harold found excuses for himself, he was confused over his sudden outburst of "emotions that he couldn't have possibly felt". He had been trying to make Erica hate him for eight years, he had tried every possible means to cancel his engagement with her, and yet he had almost reflexively blurted out that she was his fiancée. In other words, what he felt was——.

"Like hell that would happen....!"

With a low voice, he groaned in denial of his own thoughts. There was absolutely no way what he felt was love. Harold was a young and healthy man. He only temporarily lost control of himself from seeing Erica's attractive figure. It was nothing more than a physiological phenomenon, lust. That had to be it.

However, there was another problem, and that was the sulky behavior Harold had showed while he left his seat without Aurelian's permission. Even though Aurelian was also in the wrong, as Itsuki had said, he was this region's leader. The Berlioz house had an even higher standing than Harold's

family, and yet a youngster like himself went and treated them with that much contempt. It would be no surprise if he was banned from entering the region for the rest of his life.

If that were to happen, he wouldn't be able to follow Itsuki's request, and he didn't know what Justus would say about that.

Though he considered apologizing now that he had regained his calm, it was surely going to be extremely difficult for him to express his gratitude properly. Or rather, the situation would most likely grow even worse if he tried that. Under the light of dusk, Harold was wondering what he should do.

"What are you doing in such a place?"

Harold turned around towards the voice that should have had nothing to do to here.

And then, in the middle of a vista that mirrored Medieval Europe, he caught a glimpse of Erika's standing figure; dressed in a kimono, in an other-worldly contrast to her surroundings. Her startling beauty would probably spur anyone on.

She was not expressionless, but Harold couldn't read her emotions from her facial expression, though she did give him chills.

"I can go wherever the hell I want. What'd you come for?"

"My big brother thought you might have gotten lost."

"Don't treat me like an infant. It's disgusting."

"I'm just as troubled as you are."

Well, that was certainly right. It was safe to assume that Itsuki had pushed Erica's back, telling her "Go comfort Harold now, it's a perfect opportunity.". In that sense, Harold felt sorry for her as she was being jerked around no less than him.

"Then hurry up and go report to that foolish brother of yours that his concern is useless."

"I'll do just that, but first, there is something I'd like to personally ask you, Harold-sama."

"Something you'd like to ask?"

When he said that, Harold remembered. Itsuki had kept his presence completely secret from Erica.

So it was only natural that she would wonder why Harold was here. Though normally it would have been okay to explain it to her once they met face to face, the atmosphere and timing to do so had completely vanished thanks to Itsuki's shenanigans.

He really excelled at creating trouble.

"Hey, young miss, you've got quite the unusual get-up going on there. Are you here sightseeing?"

Suddenly, a voice came in between Harold and Erica. The owner of that voice was a very well tanned, dark skinned man who had healthy, firm muscles. From his tank-top shirt, his short baggy trousers, his feet that were bare except for a pair of sandals, and the bandanna around his head, Harold could guess upon the very first sight that the man was a sailor.

At the same time, Harold figured what the man's greetings were for.

"We're not going to board your boat."

At a nearby dock, on the waterway, one small boat was anchored, and unlike the ones made for traveling and transportation, it had a few simple decorations on it. Its size and shape weren't much different from that of the other small boats in the area, but it felt like it was rather made for pleasure cruises. This sailor was probably the owner of that boat.

"Well, don't say that. I mean, this is your chance to show how reliable your are to your lady."

Despite Harold's cold answer, the sailor did not seem to be discouraged. On the contrary, he went and misunderstood Harold and Erica as being a pair of lovers.

It was no strange thought to have from the point of view of a third party. The problem was that the man's misunderstanding had put a land mine between Harold and Erica.

Troubled by the sailor, Harold tried to walk away from that place. But his feet were stopped by one unexpected statement.

"Right, right. Then, a trip for two people, please."

Harold couldn't believe his ears. If Erica wanted to have a pseudo-pleasure cruise, she was free to do suit herself.

However, she said "two people". In this situation, it was impossible for those two people to be anyone other than Harold and Erica.

".....I don't see your maid anywhere."

"Juno is helping with setting up the assembly hall."

Though Harold bet on a small possibility, all he got in return was an answer equivalent to a "what about it?". As expected, it seemed like Erica wanted to ride on the boat with Harold.

Harold couldn't understand what Erica was thinking at all. However, if she just wanted to have a talk, she wouldn't have needed to go out of her way to board on the boat. Harold's mind was confused as he couldn't think of a logical answer.

As if she had seen an opportunity in that confusion, Erica took hold of Harold's hand.

"Let's go, Harold-sama."

【Hey, what hell are you....!"]

"But you won't get on if I don't do that, right?"

"Obviously! Why would I want to go with.... let go of my damn hand!"

"My big brother said that, when dealing with Harold-sama, the more aggressive I am, the better."

"And you believe that guy's words?!"

"I don't. I'm just using them at my own convenience."

That was unnecessarily vicious. Erica really was her brother's sister. Having concluded that it was impossible to convince Erica with words, Harold used all of his strength to shake her off. However, from some reason, he couldn't free himself from her grasp.

No matter how many times he tried, his strength would just scatter and leave him. His efforts had little to no effect.

It was Erica, who was holding Harold's left hand, that gave him an explanation to that incomprehensible phenomenon.

"Harold-sama, do you know about "Aiki"? Aiki is a sort of taijutsu, putting it simply, it's a technique that robs the opponent's body of its freedom."

From those words, Harold had a cold sweat.

Erica, who spoke indifferently, was mysteriously threatening. Actually, Harold even felt that she was a little scary.

(I do know about it, but why the hell does Aikido exist in this world?!)

Even if it somehow did exist in this world, it was still weird for Erica to make use of Aikido.

In the game, there was no close quarter combat command for Erica. Her only physical attack was archery, and besides, she was supposed to be a character that specialized in magic and focused only on rear-support.

And yet, how could she master something like Aikido?

It appeared that she had evolved beyond Harold's expectations.

"Wow, didn't think the young miss was actually the most reliable one in this couple. Never easy to deal with a woman stronger than you, is it? Just hang in there, Lady-killer."

With a look that had surprise and sympathy mixed in it, the sailor lightly hit Harold's back to comfort him.

Although Harold was very dissatisfied, in the end, he couldn't shake off Erica's hand and was taken to the small boat while feeling shy as the curious eyes of the people around had gathered on him, having likely seen "a man with an evil look in his eyes who dared to complain while being led by the hand of a stunning beauty".

In that small boat, Harold couldn't help but feel like he was riding with the grim reaper over the river Styx.

Chapter 66

"So you came to escort me?"

"Yeah. And it's damn annoying."

Harold, who was forced to board on the ship despite his futile resistance, honestly told Erica about the circumstances that he didn't necessarily have to hide.

Erica's reaction upon finding out the truth was to deeply lower her head and apologize.

"I am sorry for my elder brother's selfishness."

"If you were going to apologize, you should have taken hold of his reins from the get go."

Although even Harold himself felt that his mouth's complaint was absurd, he did believe that if Erica could take control of Itsuki, his chances of meeting with her would decrease. So he wanted Erica to work hard at it, for the benefit of each-other's mental health.

Well, that's a matter for another time. Thinking that, Harold put his feelings back in order at once. And then, he addressed Erica.

"So, that's it? You didn't do all this just so you could ask me about something that trivial, right?"

".... Indeed. There is something I'd like you to confirm, Harold-sama."

"Just keep in mind that I have no obligation to answer your questions."

From the questions he could expect, there was hardly any answer he could freely give out to her. Be it his current position, or the contents of his mission, he had to keep silent about basically everything when it came to the matters related to Justus.

"Of course, it's fine to just answer what you can, Harold-sama."

"Mhm, just hurry and get this over with."

"Thank you very much. Then, I'll get right to the point. Why did you try to

cancel your engagement with me at that time five years ago?"

As she asked that, Erica lowered the volume of her voice. That was likely in order to avoid being overheard by the sailor.

But said sailor did not seem to have much interest in Harold and Erica as he was working hard at introducing Kablan. It seemed like he was only speaking because he was obliged to do it, rather than to inform the customers on board about the town. However, even though the man was doing his job halfheartedly, it was quite convenient for Harold.

"Why ask about something that obvious?"

"Allow me to rephrase my question. Why did you do try to cancel it at that timing in particular?"

That timing was when the decision of his execution was overturned and it had been decided that Harold was going to get transferred to Justus' research establishment.

After the revision of his judgement, Harold directly confronted Tasuku, who was watching the trial, about the marriage cancellation. Though Tasuku had a sad expression on his face, he didn't seem to be very surprised. He had probably prepared himself mentally as he knew from long ago that this day would come sooner or later.

Harold was very happy and surprised as he didn't think that Tasuku would agree to break off the engagement, though he only did it indirectly.

Harold's parents, Hayden and Jessica, who were together with Justus as the time, were greatly troubled. They were, of course, strongly opposed to the cancellation and they persistently tried to make Harold reconsider his choice, but he still insisted that he was not willing to get married with Erica.

Even now, Harold's father, Hayden, was still regularly sending him letters to try and persuade him, but this was a decision Harold had made before he even met with Erica. He wasn't going to change it now.

Incidentally, Harold had suggested the cancellation immediately after the end of the retrial, just before people left the tribunal.

He did that so as to make it known to the surroundings, and most importantly, to Justus, that he had broken off his link with the Sumeragi family.

Justus was the one responsible for the miasma outbreak that was still happening within the Sumeragi territory. If Harold was still on friendly terms with the Sumeragi after becoming affiliated with Justus, there was risk that the fact that he was the one who gave the medicine which limited the damage caused by the miasma would be exposed.

If that happened, then Justus would be suspicious about how Harold, who was ten years old at the time, and yet knew how to produce a medicine that could raise immunity to the miasma. Being under Justus' suspicion while working for him would have been fatal.

With that being the case, Harold was really regretting not reminding the Sumeragis to keep the matters concerning the antibody-drug a secret, but it was too late for that. Although the information wasn't made public, there were many people within the Sumeragis' mansion, and among their relatives, who knew that Harold was the one who came up with the idea of the medicine. Additionally, Harold couldn't deny he was afraid that Justus would dissect him out of curiosity, so as to find out how Harold was able to anticipate the range of the contamination on the map etc....

Harold wasn't good enough with words to give a genius mad scientist a plausible explanation without contradicting himself, so all he could do was to crush the possibility of ever being questioned.

Well, long story short, he cancelled the engagement to protect himself. To begin with, in the game's story, the original Harold was not assigned to work under Justus and the like. Originally, Harold, whose mind was burning for revenge over Liner's and the others, who had defeated him twice, was taken advantage of by Justus, who gifted him a special medicine called『Astral potion』.

It was a doping item which, upon ingestion, amplified the magic within the user's body, in other words, it amplified his astral body, therefore granting him an unusually potent power-up.

However, his body couldn't keep up with the strengthening, and it swelled up, overtaken by its own power. By the end, it took on a grotesque shape that couldn't be called human, and then, the original Harold lost his life as his own body broke down.

Though Harold could avoid all this by simply not taking the astral potion, there was a demerit that came with it, because Liner's party would not gain the experience they'd have accumulated by fighting the boosted Harold. So he had no choice but to strengthen their equipment, and teach them the tactics that were effective in the game to raise their abilities and potential.

Putting that aside, the reason why Harold agreed to work under Justus despite that never happening in the game's story was simply that it was his only way to survive. At any rate, Justus had suddenly appeared before Harold who was incarcerated and gave him two choices "Would you rather be executed or work for me? If you come with me, I'll give you more power. Well, you'll probably go through hell though."

Harold had no choice but to accept his proposal so as to survive. However, that choice he was given had an absurdly high sense of upending death upon it. Helping Justus with his work meant lending him a hand for his ambitions. That would inevitably lead him to becoming Liner and the others' enemy, and if things went well for Justus, it would cause the downfall of the world. Harold had also considered well enough whether he'd just end up as a throwaway piece for Justus.

Although the option Justus gave him was his only way to survive, it wasn't simple to select it.... or rather, it shouldn't have been simple.

Harold had been starting to forget about this but, that cynical mouth of his had other functions than automatically changing his words. That function had appeared only twice in the past, in addition, it was when Harold had just come to this world.

Said function simply made Harold repeat words from the original story's character. Which meant that the lines the original Harold had spoken in the game would come out of Harold's mouth. Though the time and setting were different from the original story's, the situation where Justus gave power to Harold was the same as the game's event.

After a loud laugh that took even Harold himself aback, his mouth went and said to Justus.

『Hand over that power. I'll teach you what true hell is, bastard. 』

That was the brisk decision the original Harold had foolishly taken in the

game.

And thus, in a completely unforeseen development, Harold became a henchman under the commands of the story's last boss.

But no matter how unexpected this was, it was a good thing for Harold. Thanks to that, he could focus on the next route to take, and on his ongoing problems. While reflecting upon those bitter memories, Harold answered Erica's question.

"That was because it was the best setting for me to cancel it."

"You actually wanted to make it known to your surroundings that you've cut your ties with the Sumeragi family, right?"

Her guess was dead on, it was as if Erica had read Harold's mind. That was impossible, but then, how had Erica reached that answer? Could it be that she knew something about Justus? Such doubts crossed Harold's mind.

"Well, I wonder about that."

Harold was careful so as not to carelessly bring up Justus' name. It was unlikely that Erica had laid her hands on information that even Elu couldn't obtain.

Even if she somehow knew the true nature of Justus' identity, she could only speculate on Harold's intentions. Which meant that despite her earlier words, Erica had not seen through Harold's aim, and her answer was just derived from her own point of view. But there was a higher probability that her words simply happened to be right by chance, and she actually didn't know the deeper meaning behind them at all.

"You went that far and ended up all alone for..."

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing, don't mind me."

Harold was too deep in his thoughts and had missed the murmur which escaped from Erica's mouth. He was interested but, judging from the blunt attitude Erica answered him with, she likely wouldn't reply if he asked her to repeat herself again.

Well, in the future, rather than Erica.... Harold had better observe the Sumeragi family as a whole to check whether they were investigating Justus for

something. Since Itsuki was the one who made the request for Harold's mission, there was no way the Sumeragi family wasn't acquainted with Justus to some extent.

As Harold had been under the impression that his link with the Sumeragis had been completely broken off, he had not considered at all the option that they would take action against Justus.

"Was that all you wanted to confirm?"

"There is one more thing. Could you tell me to where the truth starts and ends in those rumors about you?"

"I have no interest for these detestable kinds of things. I don't know about them so whether they're true or not is none of my concern."

"There is the one about you being a "knight killer" who slaughtered dozens of knights. Then there is the one that said you had a pact with a devil and that you could get riches by kidnapping children and selling them to him. And, also, the one about you dyeing your hands with every evil deed in existence, therefore completely mastering the path of evil. I guess there are other ones, but these are the main rumors circulating."

Harold had heard about every single one of these rumors. But hearing them again from someone else's mouth was still considerably difficult. Well, most of them were due to Justus dramatizing the facts.

Regarding the knight killing case, it was in the middle of one of Harold's missions where he simply happened to encounter a group from the knight order that was attacked and almost exterminated by a herd of monsters. The group had about ten people in it, but when Harold arrived, more than half of them were already dead, and the others were on the verge of dying. The monsters had pretty much annihilated them and, in the end, there were only two people among the group who preserved their lives. However, they both retired from the knight order immediately after that because of the remaining after-effects of their injuries.

As for the kidnappings rumors, it came from the times when Harold would take the orphans and juvenile vagrants that he happened to see in the slums and on battlefields, he would then leave some money and goods for them and

take them to an orphanage that he deemed to be decent. Harold could count the number of times he did that on one hand so it shouldn't have caught Justus' eyes, and yet the matter was somehow still exposed to him. That made Harold realize all over again how terrifying Justus really was.

And that last thing, about him "mastering the path of evil", was probably just an image people had of Harold after combining various rumors. Upon hearing of this, Justus had lamented;"Oh come on, It's too vague. They made it way too halfheartedly."so he likely had nothing to do with it. Harold found it extremely annoying that Justus was so devoted to ruining his reputation that he would lament over something like this.

Whenever he heard rumors about himself, Harold could not help thinking "If that had really happened, I'd have been arrested long ago, wouldn't I?".

Erica was probably able to realize that as well, but the fact that she asked about the rumors meant that she was likely still half in doubt. If that was the case, Harold was going to use this to make doubly sure that Erica's evaluation of him was at rock bottom, but, if possible, he'd prefer it if she didn't spread her hate within the hero's party after joining Liner, lest this turn into a full-blow confrontation between him and Liner's party.

He wanted the party to have just enough faith in him to accept his advice and information. If that turned out to be impossible, he'd have to do it via Elu.

"Yes, this hand of mine is tainted with blood and sins. But, so what? The weak can only blame their foolish selves for turning into preys."

This answer was a massive lump of elitism. But even though things may have appeared this way, Harold had actually managed to control himself and held back the words "inferior species" from coming out of his mouth.

Harold looked at the palm of his right hand. This hand had wielded a sword which slayed monsters and humans alike, there was no denying that, but still, that didn't mean Harold felt nothing from it.

"Perhaps we can't understand each other because our values differ too much, but...."

Suddenly, Harold's right hand felt warm, and was wrapped by a soft feeling. The heat then gradually spread.

The source of that warmth was actually Erica's hands, which were grasping Harold's right hand. Erica gently and lovingly held it close to her chest.



"But, with this hand, you've protected my important people. That's the

undeniable truth. So, no matter how much of a sinner you are, I'm willing to accept you."

Harold could not allow himself to look away from Erica's eyes which seemed so warm that they could pull him in.

He felt like his reason was ringing alarm bells to stop him from looking at Erica's eyes any longer. Even so, as if he had been possessed, Harold unintentionally gripped Erica's hand, and— —.

"Well, that's probably what my brother would tell you. I mean, he likes you a lot after all."

As Erica said that, she released Harold's right hand. The warmth in Harold's hand went down as it was exposed to the air, and, at the same time, Harold regained his calm.

While a mischievous smile appeared on Erica's face, Harold realized he had been tricked. He, who suddenly became embarrassed, turned his eyes towards another direction and folded his arms.

While listening to Erica's discreet and yet cheerful laughter, Harold kept looking the other way, to hide his embarrassment, until the boat arrived at the dock.

Chapter 67

(Harold's Pov)

Having finished the sightseeing tour to keep up appearances, Harold decided to return to the Berlioz mansion alongside Erica. Erica didn't say anything in particular as she was silently walking a few steps behind Harold, with a smile on her face.

In the mean time, Harold tried to somehow regain his composure.

Earlier, his eyes had been snatched away by some kind of mental bewilderment. He couldn't deny that having his hand grasped had been effective on him, but the emotions he felt were absolutely not love.

As a man, there was no way he would stay completely indifferent upon having his hand taken by a beautiful woman like Erica, so his reaction was unavoidable. However, that didn't mean there was any special meaning behind it either. Moreover, considering the roles he and Erica had to play, and the future that was awaiting this world, he couldn't possibly allow himself to be attracted to her or anything of the sort.

As Harold enumerated those negative matters in his head, he considerably regained his composure.

Still, it was quite mischievous of Erica to tease him like this. Though physically Harold had the same age as her, mentally, he was ten years older. His honor as a man was on the line as he had been led by the nose by an adolescent who wasn't even in her twenties, despite himself being a proper adult.

I gotta calm down already, Harold secretly pumped himself up. And like that, the heat in his face and his perturbed heart-beat completely settled down.

For now, Harold and Erica uneventfully arrived at the Berlioz residence where Aurelian, who had been waiting for Harold, apologized to him, making the event from lunch-time water under the bridge.

Not only did Aurelian not blame Harold for his extreme rudeness, on the contrary, he apologized to him. Harold was astonished by the negotiation skills of Itsuki, who had remained on the scene and made the situation evolve in that direction. It seemed like his title as the next head of the Sumeragi household

was not just for show.

To show his appreciation to Itsuki, Harold was determined to properly do the work that was requested of him. Well, in the first place, if Itsuki hadn't given that task to him, Harold wouldn't have been rude to Aurelian, but still, Harold decided to make use of that to raise his morale as he wasn't motivated to do the job at all. If he took it easy and failed his mission, Harold didn't know what kind of retribution he would get from Justus and Itsuki.

And then, one hour after Harold and Erica came back, the party started. Apparently, most of the participants in the assembly hall had come by boat. After the party's hosts, Itsuki and Sylvie, finished greeting the guests on the banquet hall's stage, they went around the room, thanking the participants for their congratulatory words. And, in but a moment, the two of them disappeared, buried in the crowd.

Even so, the number of people they could talk to at the same time was limited, they couldn't easily handle that whole crowd. So, in the mean time, the participants who weren't busy with anything, started entertaining themselves as they wished; they were chatting with each other, enjoying the dishes and alcohol, or dancing to the orchestra's performance.

But, frankly speaking, among all of that, the most popular activity was flirting.

However, they weren't flirting on a whim like what could be seen in town, here, they were aiming for future companions and connections. As one would expect, this type of socialization was very common among the sons of aristocrats and big merchants.

And as Harold had somehow anticipated, Erica was an obvious target to these kinds of men as she was breathtakingly beautiful, came from a distinguished family and yet was still unmarried. Although there were many seemingly noble women dressed beautifully in the assembly hall, Erica was still the most popular.

Which meant that Harold's work kept him all the more busy. The men who started going on the offensive with Erica were knocked down one by one by Harold's violent words, but far from decreasing, their numbers were getting bigger.

At a certain point, the crowd that was formed around Erica was as big as the

crowd around Itsuki.

"Beautiful lady, may I ask for your name?"

"Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

"How about we get out of here and go to my room? I have some quite precious wine there."

Several men were whispering pick-up lines to her. Harold was not Prince Shōtoku, he could only hear three people at the same time, that was his limit. As for the voices of the other people he couldn't listen to, they were just noise in his ears.

Those men were extremely troublesome. And they seemed to be intentionally ignoring the existence of Harold, who was actually next to Erica. In other words, he was also completely surrounded, just like her.

It seemed like the situation was a few steps away from getting out of control. Erica was at a loss about how to reply to them.

Even though she tried to reply to everyone, every-time she answered, three or four other voices would appear so she couldn't catch up with them. But that was only natural, she only had one mouth.

Her patience was at its limits.

Harold's right arm forced its way in the men's way, as if to protect Erica. At this point, it seemed impossible for them to ignore Harold, therefore, they started threatening him with sharp voices that had completely changed from when they were speaking to Erica.

"Who the hell are you? Get out of my way."

"What a boorish behavior."

"Seriously. How could a rude man like you possibly stand next to Erica? Know your place."

"Why are you so silent? Too cowardly to keep acting like a knight?"

Harold was under a concentrated fire of malice.

But this still wasn't at a level where Harold would turn on his switch. Rather, as a bad example to follow, he was worried about their behavior, as he believed one could not simply hurl abuses towards someone without knowing their

identity.

At least some of them should have known that Erica was the host's younger sister, and as Harold had been escorting said little sister the whole time, they should have asked themselves whether Harold was one of the Sumeragi or Berlioz family's officials.

Well, normally, in these kinds of festivities, everyone knew about the name, face, title and official position of everyone else, so those men probably looked down on Harold who didn't appear anywhere in their personal list.

Harold put those trivial thoughts aside for now. The main problem for the time being was how he would go about making those men disperse. In this happy occasion, violence was completely forbidden, let alone brandishing a weapon. If he raised an uproar, he would be throwing cold water on the party.

But, having said that, persuading them with words was not even worth trying. In any case, even if he tried, he would only provoke them, insult them and make things worse.

Then, what should I do? Harold wondered as he could think of only one thing.

Harold exhaled for a bit while getting rid of any useless feelings. What he needed was a very pure killing intent.

He pictured the men in front of him as powerful and clearly hostile foes. He pictured them as being sworn enemies at Justus' level. And like that, a burning flame colder than ice was lit up and shaking within in his mind.

Rampaging hostility, boiling malice, and pure killing intent were mixed up as one within him, in complete harmony. Then, Harold put those feelings into words, and poured them on those men, without mercy.

"Get out of my sight."

It was only one short sentence. However, within that sentence was an excessively dense, illusion of death.

Harold was thinking of frightening the men and make them run away.

However, the power of Harold's killing intent — of his thirst for blood, was no longer at that level. No one moved from their spot. Of course, it wasn't because the thirst for blood wasn't effective.

It was actually too effective. For someone who wasn't resolved to die or had

never been on the verge of death, it was impossible to bear. It could even make them feel actual physical pressure.

A thud resounded. Looking at the source of the sound, one of the men around Erica had lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground. As if taking that noise as a signal, some other men noisily fell down as well.

The reactions varied from one person to another, there were those who fainted like the other men, there were those who were shaking with fear and unable to stand up, then there were those who perceived their own death and were in tears, begging for their lives.

It was a bizarre sight to see. It naturally ended up attracting the attention of the surrounding people.

From a gap in the crowd, Harold could see Itsuki who had placed his right hand on his head, as if he was saying “Oops”.

And Harold was in a quite similar state of mind from these unexpected results.

Starting from this day, a story, seemingly close to the truth, started to spread among the aristocrats.

『The daughter of the Sumeragi has a watchdog that could bite a death god to death. 』



(???’s Pov)

The man thought he had died. Or, to be more accurate, he actually thought he had been killed.

However, either way, he was wrong.

But he had certainly felt that a sword had pierced his abdomen. He even had the illusion that it had cut his neck.

And what made him feel that way was someone’s thirst for blood.

However, it seemed like it hadn’t been aimed towards the man. As he turned his head and looked behind him, many people had fallen down on the ground here and there, in the middle of those people was a beautiful woman dressed in a kimono, and a young man who stood beside her as if to protect her.

Judging from the situation, the man assessed that the young man was probably the one who let loose that thirst for blood. Considering that the man

had only felt the after-effect of that thirst of blood and yet it had given him such a vivid image of death, there was no way that young man was an ordinary person.

Who was that young man? How strong was he? And why was he here? Though the man had many question, none of these things mattered to him.

Because the man's eyes were completely nailed on the beautiful woman next to the young man. She was like a lovely, fragile flower basking in the moonlight. But in front of her, even the brightest of flowers, the most dazzling butterfly, or a perfect view of paradise, would be overshadowed.

Her beauty was that powerful. Which is why the young man's existence instantly went out of the man's head, and before he noticed, he went to greet the woman.

"Meeting you today is the luckiest thing that ever happened in my life. And I'd like to share this wonderful feeling with you. But first, may I hear you name, my lady?"

".... I am the daughter of the Sumeragi family, Erica Sumeragi. I'd be pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, Erica! A lovely name, fitting of your beauty. I am-“】

"-Francis J. Arkwright."

The man's — Francis' words were interrupted by a young man. The young man who was standing next to Erica had correctly guessed the name of Francis, who had yet to introduce himself.

And that felt suspicious to him. Francis had decided to take part in this event at the last minute. In other words, his name wasn't on the list where the participants' names were noted prior to the celebration. Which meant that the young man knew about Francis from before.

"Do you know me? Well, I am famous after all."

"Yeah, for your philandering, that is."

"Wha.....! You seem to know me very well. But that information is already outdated."

Francis kneeled on one knee and took Erica's hand.

"Because my heart will be completely devoted to Erica from now on!"

"Mister Arkwright, even if you suddenly tell me that, I am not going to...."

"Arkwright is way too formal! Call me Franck."

Erica was perplexed by Francis' fierce approach. However, this was his style. When he seduced a woman, he did it with passion, and if pushing wasn't enough, that just meant he had to push harder. Up to now, Francis had conquered many women using that technique.

However, now that he had crossed paths with Erica, he was confident that all the women he had conquered were no more than a training so as to win over Erica's heart.

But that wasn't all. He believed that his naturally handsome looks, as well as everything he inherited thanks to his lineage, were all part of the fate gifted to him by god so that he wouldn't be inferior when compared to Erica.

If someone came in the way of that fate, he wouldn't even mind facing a monster who could kill people by merely using his thirst for blood, and Francis believed he would definitely win against him. With that strong conviction, Francis looked towards the pupils of the young man next to Erica.

But the young man's eyes seemed completely indifferent, as if Francis' strong conviction did not matter to him in the slightest. Still, that had caught Francis off-guard.

He expected at least some sort of reaction.

"This is quite unexpected. Are you not going to stop me?"

"You seem like a different kind of dimwit from the masses that tumbled around here. Do what you want."

As he said that, the young man crossed his arms and leaned against the wall behind him. From the young man's attitude, Francis could feel that he didn't really care about what was happening.

Was he not Erica's servant or fiancé?

Though Francis still had many doubts, the young man had said that he wouldn't get in his way so this was convenient for him. And so, when he was about to restart his attack on Erica...

"Well, that is, if you can get that guy's permission."

Added the young man, as Francis felt someone's hand on his shoulder. That hand had so much strength to it that it felt like it was going to crush his shoulder. But it was that very pain that triggered Francis' memory. He had been distracted by her first name, but the woman had certainly called herself Sumeragi. And Francis knew someone with that same last name. He timidly turned his head around. There, stood someone who was on such good terms with Francis that he could call him a friend, his name was Itsuki Sumeragi.

Francis, who instantaneously understood the situation and the relationship between Itsuki and Erica, spoke up without any hesitation.

"Itsuki, allow me to call you my brother-in-law from now on."

"Call me what?! Get your hand off Erica, you lustful imp!"

Itsuki's angry voice resounded everywhere through the Berlioz mansion.

Chapter 68

Afterwards, though there was no disaster, the situation became extremely chaotic.

The people who had fainted couldn't just be ignored, so they were carried in a vacant room. As for the people who were still conscious but shaking in fear, they were taken to another room since they needed to be calmed down. Giving a sidelong glance to that scene, Harold, wanting to put himself in solitary confinement, decided to return to the room which had been assigned to him. As the main culprit behind the situation, his help would only make things worse. But even if that wasn't the case, he was hurting from the surrounding people's glances.

Erica was looking after the fallen men, Francis continued to make passes at her while helping her, and Itsuki was trying to stop him. Thinking that nothing could be done about this situation, Harold shrugged his shoulders and hurriedly disappeared from that place. Though this was bad for Itsuki, Harold judged that, knowing Francis, things would turn out just fine.

Francis J. Arkwright.
He had emerald green eyes, and loose wavy blond hair. He gave off the impression of being a frivolous womanizer and slightly narcissistic, but overlooking that, Francis was a proper man who always stayed true to his principles. His nickname was Franck.
Although he used a rapier in battle, he was somewhat lacking in attack power. In the game, his physical attack level was lower than Erica's and Collet's, and was only a rank above Lifa's. On the other hand, the magic spells he could use were aplenty, he could even use healing magic, but it wasn't that easy to invoke for him as he didn't have that much MP.

Despite those lacking characteristics, he was still a jack of all trades. He looked exactly like a prince, and not without reason as he was actually a prince of the kingdom, and the 37th in line to inherit the throne.
Be that as it may, he himself did not expect much from that position and wasn't waiting for his turn on the throne to come, he didn't even want to become king.

For the time being, he seemed to have no dissatisfaction with his present condition as he could live freely as he wished just by having the title of a prince.

Of course, he was one of the original story's characters. He was extremely fond of beautiful women and would at times let go of his honor and start hitting on them, but if one closed his eyes on that, Franck wasn't that bad of a guy. In the game, he wasn't really able to really seduce any women anyway as he was recognized as a prince who stood above the nation and was travelling together with Liner who was driven by righteousness.

Therefore, based on how he was portrayed in the game's lore, it was not surprising at all that he suddenly started making passes at Erica. What was surprising however was his statement about not aiming for other women anymore.

If Francis stopped being a playboy, it would be like if Harold stopped being cynical. In other words, it would be inconceivable.

Perhaps he had been a little too charmed by Erica. He did recognize her as a beautiful woman in the game, but looking at how passionate he was right now, it was obvious that he was even more taken with her than in the original story. And Harold had a hard time figuring out the cause of that.

(Oh right, Erica's becoming even more beautiful than she was in the game, isn't she?)

That's the only thing Harold could come up with, having no reliable way of finding out the reason behind Francis' enthusiasm.

Well, it should be fine, thought Harold as he stretched himself, refreshing his mood.

Looking outside his window, the weather was still as good as it was the day before. Despite the various happenings from the previous day, Harold's sleep seemed to have gone fine since his body was in a good condition.

Today's breakfast's going to be delicious, while having these kinds of carefree thoughts, Harold remembered the sketch of the residence's layout, which had been placed in his room, and he headed towards the dining hall of the mansion. The breakfast appeared to be laid out in a smorgasbord style, but of course, it wasn't just a self-service buffet. It was a buffet with an air of high society to it,

where people could actually order their food and have the chef make it on the spot.

Harold had ordered a chop steak for he deemed meat was a must in these occasions. And as he looked for a vacant seat with said steak in his hand...

"Oh"

"Hmm?"

".....tsk"

Harold's eyes met with Francis', who had already chanced upon a seat. Francis reacted to that, which caught Itsuki's attention. As for Harold, he clicked his tongue by reflex.

Harold tried to ignore the duo as he felt that this was going to be troublesome, but unfortunately, one of them called out to him.

"Hold on. I'd like to have a little talk."

"If it's about Erica, ask her elder brother."

"No, I want to talk with you."

"Exactly. So you should just sit down for now."

Itsuki went behind Harold before he even noticed, held his shoulders with a solid grip, and made him sit down by force.

Having had his refreshed mood ruined like so, Harold wanted to let out a sigh.

"So, what the hell do you want to ask?"

"Let's start by introducing ourselves. I am Francis J. Arkwright. “**】**

"I'm Lord Strouse."

"You knew about me from before, right? How come?"

"I only knew your name. But that doesn't mean I've ever personally met you."

"Well, I guess that's right. Because I don't remember you either."

Francis was staring fixedly at Harold, closely observing him. Without caring about that, Harold kept carrying one mouthful of his steak after another from his plate to his mouth.

As he chewed on it, the juices started to overflow. The meat disappeared in his mouth with the juice, as if it was melting, and he hardly needed to put any strength in his jaw. The taste permeated both the meat and the fat. He didn't need to express in words how delicious it was. He just silently ate the rare steak that was oozing blood.

"..... This looks horrifying, it's as if you were eating an actual person."

"Well, there is no denying that. But even though your mouth is dyed with blood, I think it actually looks good on you rather than messy."

"If you took some red wine instead, it would look even better."

"In short, it's the red of the blood that looks good on me, right? Alright, then If you bastards don't mind, I'll just use your blood instead of the meat's."

""No thank you.""

The two answered in harmony. Despite the fuss they made about Erica, they seemed to be pretty good friends.

However, even for Harold who was familiar with the game, Itsuki and Francis being friends was a back story he hadn't heard of. It was a connection that probably didn't even exist in fan-fictions.

"Francis, you're supposed to be Itsuki's friend, right? How come you didn't even know his younger sister?"

"I knew he had a younger sister but I wasn't told she was that beautiful. Why didn't you tell me about her?"

"Because it was obvious that things would turn out like this if I did that. How could I possibly use my precious younger sister as bait for a lustful demon like you?"

That was a perfectly good reason. As Francis' friend, Itsuki had to know about his connections with women whether he liked it or not. So, given his sister complex, there was no way for Itsuki to properly introduce Erica to Francis. Apparently, Itsuki had not invited Francis to the celebration so that he could bring Erica, but Francis still heard of the party from somewhere and just happened to come by.

"Well, that's alright. From now on, the romance between Erica and I will-"】

"Will not start, ever."

"...By the way, Lord"

"...What?"

Itsuki's overbearing cut-in forced a sudden change in the topic of the conversation, but Harold decided to just roll with it.

"About yesterday's incident, I heard from Itsuki that you were shielding Erica, but, wasn't that overkill?"

"I barely grazed them with some blood thirst, those small fries can only blame themselves for not even being able to deal with something of that level."

"How many brave men out there you think would be able to keep calm after receiving a blood thirst like that one at close proximity?"

"Even Franck and I would have a tough time with it."

"I thought I was stabbed from behind and died."

"You should have felt something similar from the eyes of those women you had your way with, probably without their consent."

"That joke's in poor taste..."

Franck showed a stiff smile. Then Harold directly asked him.

"Yesterday you said some bullshit about devoting your heart to Erica or whatever. Were you actually serious about that?"

"Of course I was serious. It's not unreasonable for you to doubt me since you know my past, but right now, I intend to terminate all the relations I have with any other woman."

As he said so, his eyes were frank and there was even some seriousness to his voice. Harold couldn't help but feel a sense of incongruity since he knew the Francis from the game, but perhaps this was one of the effects of the world starting to change its course from the game's story.

If that was the case, then it would be fine to say that Harold was the culprit.

Originally, Harold thought Erica should stick with Liner simply because he was

the protagonist and Erica was a member of his party. However, there was no clear depiction of a love affair between the two in the game, and really, the problem wasn't who Erica's companion was going to be.

What mattered wasn't the identity of Erica's lover, but how was Erica going to get separated from Harold and break her engagement with him. In short, Harold thought "It should be fine if she sticks with Francis instead of Liner, right?" and he judged that he didn't really need to worry about this change. Well, he didn't know whether Erica would accept Francis or not though.

"If you have nothing left to do here, how about you go wag your tail in front of Erica? That way, I can eat without having to look at your face."

Harold pointed his chin at Erica, who had just entered the dining hall. Just like the previous day, Erica was being courted by many men. Though Harold didn't remember their faces because there were too many of them, if any of these people were part of the men who suffered from Harold's blood thirst the day before, then they were incredibly incorrigible. It was either that or maybe Erica had committed a sin behind the scenes.

"Wait hold on Lord, that's not what we agreed on."

"What you asked me to do was get rid of the 'beasts that look like no more than insects'. Does this man fit those criteria?"

"That's....."

Itsuki was at a loss for words. Indeed, he couldn't give that appellation to his friend.

Which was exactly why Harold had asked that question.

"I guess this isn't a conversation to have in front of him.... But still, does this mean I have Itsuki's permission?"

"Yeah, sure, knock yourself out."

"No, like hell you do! If Lord doesn't do anything, then I will!"

As soon as he said that, Itsuki charged to the barrier of people surrounding Erica. As one would expect, upon the intervention of the celebration's host, those starving beasts turned into domestic animals whose fangs were missing. The smile pressure attack, which was the Sumeragi siblings' specialty, had made

its appearance on Itsuki's face. Harold had tasted it several times before, but he still felt it was extremely intense.

"This mood isn't right to profess my love."

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't the right mood yesterday either."

When Francis made his advances, there were fallen men scattered around like corpses and other men who were rolling around on the ground in the perimeter. That mood was absolutely not right. Besides, Harold was right next to Erica at the time.

"Really? I think it was like a passionate scene, where the hero opens up his heart to a lady after finishing his fight on the battlefield while protecting her to the end."

"..... I guess it's fine if that's how the scene went in your twisted mind. But, you see, I don't care."

"Gee, that's one cold opinion. Well, even if I attempted something right now, I'd only end up getting mixed up in the chaos anyway. But, putting that aside."

A kind of cold expression, that didn't match the frivolous personality he showed so far, appeared on Francis' face as he spoke his next words.

"Lord, I still have something I'd like to talk to you about. Would you give me some of your time after this?"

"What a hassle."

"Please don't say that. Well,, I'd like you to just come by my room if you feel like it later."

Leaving these words with Harold, Francis left his seat. Having somehow ended up receiving an invitation from Francis, Harold kept racking his brains about why Francis would go as far as to invite him to his room.

Thinking about it normally, he probably wanted to ask about Erica. Harold didn't know if he could be of any use, but perhaps he could satisfy Francis by making full use of the knowledge from the character settings he roughly remembered to tell him about Erica's bust-waist-hip measurements.

But Erica doesn't necessarily have the same figure in this world as she did in the game, while thinking that, Harold finished his breakfast, caught one of the residence's servants and asked him about the room where Francis was staying. He then proceeded to Francis' room and knocked on the door.

"This is Lord. Open up quickly if you're there."

When Harold called out to Francis, the door opened up almost immediately. Upon looking at Harold's face, Francis let out a surprised voice.

"You really came?"

"Are you telling me to go back?"

"That's not it. I was just surprised because I didn't expect you to come."

That was a pretty cruel remark since he was the one who invited Harold. If this exchange happened between a couple, the other party would probably think Francis was having an affair.

"For the time being, please go inside. Allow me to entertain you."

As he was urged to do so, Harold stepped into the room. The room wasn't much different from the one assigned to Harold. There were probably many similar guest rooms in the mansion.

Francis was a prince so if he requested for a higher class room, it would probably be provided to him without a single complaint, and yet he didn't.

"But still, you really came."

"Is that all you can say?"

"No, I'm just wondering if you're making light of me. If that's the case, then it's really vexing."

"....What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean."

As Harold asked about Francis' real intention which he was unable to infer, a rapier was pointed at his throat. And it was at a distance that couldn't even be measured in millimeters as there was just a paper thin gap left between his throat and the weapon.

(What?)

He was caught completely unprepared. And unlike Aurelian's surprise attack, it was done extremely naturally, Harold was so surprised that he couldn't even voice out a sound.

And then, when Harold came back to his senses, he noticed a presence behind him. Another weapon was pointed at his back.

"Looks like you're not even carrying any weapons. That's so careless of you. Are you completely dumb or are you just that confident in yourself?"

"...Is this what "entertain" means in your empty head?"

"Yeah, that's right. Like I said earlier, red, or rather, blood looks good on you. Therefore, I thought I'd dye you in red. With your own blood."

(What's the meaning of this.....)

While feeling terrified from that mouth that wouldn't stop with its sarcasms even at a time like this, Harold was scavenging his mind looking for a clue to understand and resolve the situation.

Harold knew Francis, and he knew that he wasn't a man who would act without a reason. Then, why did he want to kill Harold? The only thing Harold and Francis shared in common was their connection with Itsuki and Erica. Assuming that was the cause, then the choices of answers could be easily narrowed down.

Did Francis do this to obtain Erica's heart, considering Harold to be his rival in love? Did he deem that Harold was not worthy of being Itsuki's friend? If that was it, then he wouldn't be taking such hard measures. Therefore, there was only one answer left.

"Tell me, what was your aim when you approached Itsuki and Erica? Harold Stokes."

Francis appeared to be one of the people who knew Harold's face and identity.

Chapter 69

"You even went as far as to call yourself by a false name to approach them, you're not going to tell me you don't know what I'm talking about at all, are you?"

The dangerous air around Francis became stronger. This was the Berlioz mansion, a festive place where Itsuki's engagement was being celebrated. At a time like this, there was no way Francis wouldn't consider the risks that came with carelessly spilling someone's blood and committing the crime of murder. Therefore, chances were that this was mostly a show of force.

Or rather, that's what Harold wanted to think, but still, Francis had actually pulled out his sword and pointed it towards him. Harold had a dreadful feeling that he'd likely be taken out instantly if he said anything funny. The truth was that Harold was in a very tight spot. If Francis had been alone, Harold would have been able to deal with him. However, if the second weapon that was pointing at Harold's back attacked, it would cause a fatal hit. Even if Harold merely showed that he had the intent to resist, he would be in danger of being erased in one stroke.

It was close to impossible for him to apologize and explain himself if he couldn't speak docilely, on the other hand, his mouth, which excelled at provoking other people and driving them into a frenzy, left no way for Harold to have a proper discussion. But though discussing things wouldn't go well no matter how Harold thought about it, it would still likely be safer than to suddenly start a fight with Francis.

Harold carefully chose his next words, not only to calm Francis and whoever was with him down, but also to calm himself down. "Would you mind lowering your weapons first? I can't talk properly like this." those were the words he selected.

"You sure are full of yourselves for cowards who wouldn't even be threats without their weapons."

Like Harold expected, the result was atrocious. Given that Francis had his rapier pointed at Harold, perhaps it would have been safer to just get down to business. Fortunately, that single sentence did not get past Francis' tolerance threshold.

"..... Even in this situation, that mouth of yours still won't stop with the abuses. As expected, the stories are true, aren't they?"

"You can call them stories or whatever, but at the end of the day, they're just bullshit rumors. Don't go thinking you can measure my power with those worthless tales."

"So you're not denying that you're Harold?"

"I was never okay with taking an alias. Who the hell would call themselves "Lord" if they weren't forced to do it?"

If Justus hadn't entrusted Itsuki with the authority to give orders to Harold, Harold would have firmly refused to take that fake name. He wouldn't willingly make his own dark history grow.

But if Harold told Francis about that, he would become furious that a bad guy like Harold got friendly with Itsuki. And Harold was afraid that even if he told Francis, he wouldn't believe him, and would on the contrary get even angrier thinking that Harold brought up Itsuki's name to make up excuses.

".....Well, it's doesn't really matter, let's get back to our talk. What's your goal? And when you tried to push me to get together with Erica, was it related to that goal?"

Though Francis pressed that question with a certain confidence, Harold had no such thing as a goal here. That didn't mean he wasn't thinking of pushing the matter with Erica, but that was only because Itsuki was pushing Harold even harder. So Harold was the one who was looking for answers, from Itsuki, that is, or rather, from the Sumeragi family.

Why do you keep sticking to me?

Itsuki was persistently trying to make Harold marry Erica, and Tasuku, who approved of that, didn't want to cut ties off with Harold and would insist that he was in Harold's debt for the LP farming method and the anti-body medicines. Thanks to those two inventions, the Sumeragi family currently had no problems

on the financial side, and on the contrary, they had enough capital to give Harold compensation money.

But in the end, the miasma problem had still not been solved, and though Harold was the one who came up with the LP farming method, it would have been impossible for him to manage it so well and generate so many profits if not for the Sumeragi household's cooperation.

Then came the worst part, Harold's bad reputation. Though Itsuki had said that the Sumeragi family, in its current state, could bear with the rumors, it would have still been better for them to just not have to deal with the rumors at all. As for Harold, not only he did not want to be pressed into getting engaged with Erica, he also didn't want to go through the pain that would come to him if Justus were to doubt Harold's relationship with the Sumeragi family and to investigate Harold's intentions.

Although the talk shifted a bit, in the end, Harold's answer was still "That's not how things are.". Well, if he did answer that however, he would very likely be told to stop lying.

Then suddenly, a plan came up to Harold's head. Perhaps he could distance himself from the Sumeragis by using Francis. Moreover, if things went well, it could lead to Francis becoming stronger... maybe.

If Harold pretended that he was indeed planning something and proposed to go away from Itsuki and Erica if Francis could win against him in a bout, he would be able to avoid the development where the current situation would turn bloody.

Then, if Harold fought halfheartedly and lost, he could use that as an excuse to separate himself from the Sumeragi family and Francis would tell Itsuki and Erica to open their eyes about Harold. Many other people's words had failed to agitate Itsuki, but if the source of those words was his friend Francis' genuine worry, Itsuki wouldn't be able to coldly brush them off. That's the kind of person Itsuki was.

This would break off the engagement with Erica, break Harold's ties to the Sumeragi family, and strengthen Francis. Though that last part had a lot of unpredictable variables to it, it would still be plenty enough if the first two parts happened.

"My aim, huh? What will you do with that information?"

"I'll make my decision. If you're going to harm her, then I won't let you."

"And you think you can do that? You think you can stop me?"

"What could you possibly do in this situation? Look, if you don't stop running that mouth of yours I'll——"

"You'll kill me, right? I know that's not gonna happen. You don't have enough evidence to kill me, and right now, I'm staying at the mansion as Itsuki's friend. If you kill me here, you'll be nothing more than some common murderer. You'll put the Arkwright name to shame and you'll paint mud on the face of both the Berlioz family and even Itsuki. And your friendship with him is not one you're willing to risk so as to get rid of a danger that might not even exist. You're just making a fool of yourself, nothing more."

The rapier that was pointing at Harold was shaking. As Harold expected, Francis wasn't seriously thinking of killing him.

As the saying went, "dead men tell no tales", if Francis had killing Harold in mind, and if he murdered Harold and then concealed the matter, he wouldn't necessarily be unable to get away with it. Especially since he belonged to the Arkwright household, he should have had the power to do this.

However, Francis' pride would probably not allow that, and he would surely like to avoid hurting his friendship with Itsuki. Therefore, he probably did this merely to threaten Harold and make him confess.

"You bastard have... No, both of you bastards have made a mistake. If you didn't want to kill me but capture me if I happened to resist, you shouldn't have brought your swords close to my vital points. Especially since I'm empty handed and the ways I can fight you off are therefore limited. If I resist and you counterattack, you'll be forced to end my life, or at the very least, to seriously injure me. So let me see you try pulling your sword away even the tiniest bit to avoid that outcome. At that very instant, I'll kill you both."

That was what Harold made up on the spot.

The weapons were pointed at Harold's neck and heart. Although thinking about it normally, aiming at the vital points when restraining someone would be good to limit their actions, it was fine for Harold as long as he made it feel as if it were a fatal mistake.

As Harold thought of such things, his mouth did not stop talking.

"Why is your face looking so awful? Where did all the energy from earlier just go? Look, Francis J. Arkwright, if you think killing me will keep Itsuki and the others safe, then go ahead, kill me. Sure, you'll lose Itsuki's trust as a result, but that's only natural. Just keep in mind that once its lost, it won't be all that easy to get it back."

Francis' face was drenched in sweat. And it was no amount that would be secreted in a mild climate, in other words, it was cold sweat. It seemed like Harold had managed to push Francis to a corner psychologically. Perhaps this was an effect of Francis being unconsciously overpowered.

"...You're even greater than the rumors say, Harold. You took the advantage from me using nothing more than words."

"If that's what you think, then you're really helplessly stupid. You never had the advantage from the very start, moron."

Though Harold made a show of declaring that, it was as far from the truth as it could be. No matter how he thought about it, Francis was the one who held the advantage.

Harold was merely using his natural arrogance to try giving the impression that he had the upper hand, and then, within the time where Francis would hesitate, Harold had to decide on his approach.

"But still, I....!"

As a result from his hesitation, Francis' face looked slightly down and his eyes looked away from Harold for a mere second. Using that opening, Harold could likely knock down the person behind him and hold down Francis. However, Harold did not do so and offered a proposal instead.

"That being the case, I'll give your foolish self a chance. I'll let you duel me, with a witness. If you win, you'll get to have me do what you want me to."

"What if I lose?"

"Naturally, I'll have you listen to whatever I tell you."

"..... All right."

Francis answered so after thinking about something, and he put his rapier back into its sheath. Then, the sense of oppression coming from Harold's back disappeared. Apparently, he had succeeded at completely avoiding the danger of being killed in this place.

Though Harold was relieved, Francis murmured something he didn't expect.

"There sure seems to be more to Harold than what the rumors say about him. I'm willing to admit it, Itsuki."

"Does this mean that you completely trust him now or do you still have your doubts?"

That voice came from behind Harold. For the time being, Harold didn't think of anything and threw a kick at whatever was behind him while turning around.

"Ouch!"

If a martial artist was present, he would likely have given high praise to that beautiful, decisive, and flowing movement.

While looking down on Itsuki, who was crawling on the ground and holding his left leg's thigh, Harold questioned him with a voice that was many times colder than when he addressed Francis.

"Explain yourself."

"L-Last night, Franck came to my room and asked me『Say, isn't Lord actually Harold stokes?』so I told him『What if he is?』and then....."

While in agony, Itsuki put together an explanation.

First of all, during the previous day's uproar, one of Francis' servants had recognized Harold's identity and reported it to Francis. Apparently, that servant had seen Harold in the royal capital before.

From there, Francis went to Itsuki to confirm the information. Itsuki quickly confirmed that Lord was in fact Harold, then Francis tried to persuade Itsuki to rethink his connection to Harold but the discussion went nowhere.

And so, seeing that the conversation wasn't making any progress, Itsuki suggested this.

"You should check out for yourself what kind of person Harold is".

And that was the cause of this whole incident. For now, it was at least clear

that everything was Itsuki's fault.

It was doubtful whether Itsuki was serious about wanting to hide Harold's true identity. Or rather, he most likely wasn't serious about it at all.

Well, I'll think about his punishment later. With that thought, Harold looked back at Francis again and asked him.

"So, what kind of bullshit did Itsuki tell you? And why did you approve of me just now?"

"『By nature, Harold's not the villain that the bad rumors portray him as. It's just that he's easily misunderstood, because he's strict with people, and even stricter with himself.』that's what he said. I thought that if that was it, then you probably wouldn't have been called "knight killer" and the like and yet...."

Francis smiled in self-derision.

"You are strong. If we fought one hundred times, you'd probably beat me every single time. So when I looked away earlier, it would have been easy for you to take control over the whole situation."

"Did you create that opening on purpose? You're really making light of me."

"I could say the same about you, right? Besides, I actually put my life on the line there."

So did I damn it, Harold complained in his mind.

However, that feeling was blown off as Francis started speaking something unthinkable.

"Even in this situation, you tried to arrange things so that'd we'd stay on an equal standing, despite that being only troublesome and bringing no advantage to you whatsoever."

"And that's why you approved of me?"

"Yeah, that's right. And, also... my behavior just now was completely insane. If you want me to be punished for this, then I'll resign myself to it."

This was no joke. If it came to this, there was a risk that the flag, which led Francis to join Liner's party, would disappear. The time when the game's story started was coming soon, Francis couldn't be allowed to be confined in prison.

Therefore Harold immediately denied Francis' words.

"I have no interest in dealing with your case. It would be a waste of time to draw out my sword every time there is some fussy insect to erase."

"...Thank you for your kindness. However, I'm very sorry but..... With this alone, I still cannot completely trust you."

That was only natural. Rather, Harold would have been confused had he gained Francis' confidence from that chain of interactions only. Francis speaking his mind clearly like this was actually a good thing as it made things easy to understand for Harold.

"Therefore, I'd like to ask you something really unreasonable. Harold, may I still have that duel with you?"

Begged Francis as he bowed down from his waist. Though Francis didn't have Harold's feelings in mind when he made that request, it was actually exactly what Harold was hoping for.

"Itsuki."

"What is it?"

"You'll be the witness."

"..... Well, guess it can't be helped."

"Thank you, thank you very much."

"I don't need your gratitude. I'll be all good once you pathetically crawl to the ground upon realizing the difference there is between you and me."

Leaving Francis with that line, Harold left the room to go prepare himself. And thus, even though it wasn't in the way he was aiming for, Harold was going to have a duel with Francis.

Chapter 70

(Harold's pov)

It was about two hours after the ridiculous incident caused by Itsuki and Francis.

Those two, accompanied by Harold, were currently on the outskirts of the town of Kablan, in a white western-style house surrounded by nature, built on the shore of a lake. The building and its garden were well managed and it could be seen that they were both being maintained at fixed intervals.

It was an unoccupied house owned by the Berlioz family.

"It's on sale, but it seems like there haven't been any buyers."(*Itsuki*)

Well, that makes sense, thought Harold.

Although it was built a little far away from town, it was still extremely well located thanks to the lake and mountains behind it. The bright white of the two stories building's walls that was reflected on the blue of the water looked, in a word, beautiful. There was also a boat anchorage at the edge of the lake, as well as some sort of cottage on the terrain.

How much would it cost to purchase this? There was no mistaking that this was not a property that the aristocrats of the area could afford.

"It's not bad for a holiday house, even though it's a little too small."

"I know right? The price is pretty good too, but still, I'm not sure about this location."

The two, who belonged to the upper echelons of society, were having such a conversation without a care for Harold's feelings.

The two stories house seemed like it had as many rooms as a small hotel, so Harold couldn't understand how it could possibly feel too small, even for a holiday house. After all, this house was at the very least bigger than the Strokes' mansion.

The two upper-class men didn't even seem to realize they were spitting out poison.

As for why the three were visiting such a place, naturally, they hadn't come to check out the property.

Though they had gotten enthusiastic about having a duel before, they had no place to do it. There was no way they could start such a big disturbance within the Berlioz' mansion, so as a last resort, the three slipped out of the mansion together, claiming "Francis is looking for a holiday house so we're going to do some sightseeing and guide him through the town."

What they needed was a spacious place, far away from the public eye, where they could fight without restraints. And this place fit those conditions.

"If you want to buy a property, do it when I'm not here."

"Right. Itsuki, where should we fight?"

"Let's go around to the back."

And so, Itsuki brought Francis and Harold along to a horse riding place which was enclosed by wooden fences. Horse riding was certainly an aristocratic hobby, and even the Stokes' mansion had a stable, but there, people still had to actually go outside of the mansion's premises to gallop.

Right now, the horse riding place was completely empty. But that was only natural because, no matter how well managed the place was, it was missing the most important part of horse riding; the horses.

"If it's here, we'll sure be able to fight to our heart's contents."

"Still, it would be troublesome if this turns into a rampage. "】

"No need for such worries. I won't draw out my sword."

As Harold's said those words, Itsuki and Francis were petrified on the spot. But that was a normal reaction upon being told by someone that he wouldn't draw out his sword in a formal duel.

After a momentary pause, Francis became full of anger and questioned Harold.

"What does that mean?"

"Do i have to spell it out for you? There is no need for a sword against the likes of you, bastard."

Harold was aware of how outrageously condescending this statement was.

However, currently, there was no way for Harold to be defeated by Francis.

From the various inspections he had done over the past few years, Harold had found that, based on『Brave Hearts』's system, he currently was above level 70. In the game, there were three fights against Harold, and it was only in the third fight that the original Harold had reached level 70.

Harold had no status display he could see or the like to check out his level, but he managed to calculate his own level by having hundreds of fights with a specific monster and figuring out the power of each of his blows through counting backwards from said monster's HP.

But this was quite difficult to do. And assuming that the level-up system in this world was the same as the one in the game, if Harold fought many times, his level would naturally go up. Even though giving himself a margin of error of one or two was fine, if he were to get a massive level-up before getting to make a rough estimate of his level, then he wouldn't be able to know his own level accurately.

So, he had a technique he could use to probe his own level by another standard.

In『Brave Hearts』, just like in the main character's case, the main character's rivals, such as Harold and Vincent, could lift the usage restrictions on some techniques depending on their level.

When he came to this world, at first, Harold tried out the techniques that the original Harold could handle, but the results were terrible, there were many moves he couldn't use. And it wasn't that he had a hard time with them or was close to being able to use them, he met with only two cases, he was either able to use the techniques perfectly, or he wasn't able to use them in the slightest. And then, one day, he came to be able to use perfectly well some techniques that he hadn't been able to use at all before that point.

And it's from this that Harold came to believe that this world had a similar level-up system to the one in Brave Hearts.

Incidentally, in his very last battle, the original Harold's HP was over 140,000. Though it might have been different had he not been in his berserk state, this could still be used as an intermediate value given that Harold, in his second fight, already had 90,000 HP.

On the other hand, Francis' original level was set to the party's average level as of the time when he joined it. Although this depended on the player's play style, Francis would usually join in at level 30, more or less.

Assuming that, as of now, Francis was at Level 30 and Harold had 100,000 HP, then there was a ten times difference in HP between the two. Even if Francis, who wasn't well known for his physical power, managed to make 100 combos connect with Harold, it still wouldn't cut it.

However, there are always exceptions to everything, and due to the game's specifics, there was something called a critical hit, which would appear upon attacking an opponent's vital point. In the game, critical hits would double the damage, but things weren't so simple in this world where real elements and game elements were mixed together.

In the game, the hydra, which Harold killed in mount Giran, had a little less than 20,000 HP, and Lifa's attack probably hadn't scrapped away even a third of that. And yet, Harold killed the Hydra in a single blow, decapitating it, and he even killed the hydra's companion in less than ten hits, even though it had been in a perfect state before. This wasn't because Harold's attack power was high, it was only because he gave the hydra many fatal wounds by striking its vital points.

Well, getting a critical hit on a hydra demanded skills and a fairly high level, especially since its resistance to attacks would certainly become stronger the higher its level rose. Therefore, the existence of critical hits didn't change the fact that the higher the level, the stronger the being, but if said being dropped his guard, even a level 1 opponent could land a critical hit on him. And in this world, even a single critical hit could be fatal.

In short, unless he wasn't careful about critical hits, which could be fatal, nothing could come in the way of Harold's victory. On the contrary, he was worried that if he didn't fight with at least this much of a handicap, he'd end up badly injuring Francis.

".....I'll make you immediately take back those words."

"Go ahead, try your luck. If you can actually make me draw out my sword, it's your win."

Said Harold, in ridicule.

This was a good excuse to be defeated by someone despite the overwhelming difference in abilities. That way Harold could set it up so that, frenzied after being attacked incessantly, Francis would suddenly attack with an all-out blow, using all of his strength, then Harold would act like he felt the danger from that attack, he would raise his sword to guard himself, and would therefore be defeated.

Harold entered towards the inside of the fences and went to face Francis, around the center of the horse riding place. Francis was full of fighting spirit.

"This will be the last confirmation. Harold Stokes and Francis J. Arkwright, you shall now have a duel. And I, Itsuki Sumeragi, will serve as the witness. The duel shall end either if Harold uses his weapon, if one of you gives up, or if I judge that the battle cannot go on. Are there any objections?"

""There are none.""

The duo's voices overlapped. They were both so concentrated that they could only see each other.

And then——

"Then, may the duel, for a marriage to Erica Sumeragi, beg—"】

"Wait."

But that concentration was easily destroyed by Itsuki's words. Just now, he had said that the duel was for a marriage with Erica. Harold had not misheard.

"What's wrong?"

"Are you seriously asking me what's freaking wrong? How is getting married to Erica related to this duel?"

He hadn't said engagement but marriage. In other words, it meant that the winner would directly get married to Erica.

That was strange. They had agreed that, if Harold won, he would get the right to order Francis around, and if Francis won, Harold would disappear from Itsuki's and Erica's lives.

"It's fine. If you want to marry Erica, all you have to do is win."

"Idiot. That's not what I'm freaking worried about."

"Besides, you're already engaged to Erica, and if you lose, Franck will likely constantly try to seduce her anyway, right? So isn't it pretty much the same as the initial wager?"

"It's completely different. Especially since your intention is-"】

"-Ah, hold on a second, please. I don't really get what's going on but.... In short, if I win, I'll be able to make Erica my wife?"

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure that's not gonna be possible for you, Franck."

Itsuki provoked Francis with a smile. Perhaps his personality had been influenced by Harold.

However, Francis chose to close his eyes, cross his arms, and indulge in his reveries in silence. After he did that for a while, he opened his eyes, and his face seemed more determined than it did before.

"I feel even more motivated all of a sudden. Let's get real serious here!"

Francis' emerald green eyes were shining as he prepared to use his rapier. Harold had a bad presentiment.

And at the moment when Itsuki finished reiterating his statement as a witness and gave the start signal, Harold knew that said presentiment was right.

Francis shortened the distance between him and Harold and thrust his rapier at him. It wasn't fast enough to overwhelm Harold in anyway as he could deal with it by simply avoiding it.

However, it was still stronger and sharper than expected. Therefore, Harold dodged it by reflex, without thinking. This attack was what was supposed to become Francis' final "All out blow" in Harold's plans.

(He used the Brave mode right from the start? The hell?!)

It was a sort of invincible mode, similar to what Liner had displayed in the fighting competition. It had plenty of advantages; it made the attack power go up, it reduced the damage received by half, and it made it so that, even if a character in brave mode was attacked while he was executing a technique, said technique could not be invalidated or skipped in the middle of its execution. However, it was a "gauge technique" that needed a gauge, an attack bar, to be

filled by combinations of attack points, combo points, and guard points throughout the fight. It wasn't something that could be used right from the get go.

(Could it be that there is no need to fill an attack bar here? Is it some kind "you can use it if your feelings are strong enough" thing? Are you freaking kidding me?! Or rather, more important than that....)

Harold kept dodging over and over while trying to put his chaotic thoughts back in order. Originally, for the sake of being defeated, he was planning to only avoid the attacks that he could easily predict and let the powerful ones reach him or block them.

But he was in a vicious circle that was making him part ways with his plans to be defeated, and was making his too numerous thoughts scatter away.

Harold had a plan which consisted of knocking down Francis with bare hand techniques and then make him recover with some items he had prepared so as to make Francis "earn Harold's experience points".

As aforementioned, this world had a level-up system, but that also meant that there were different sets of experience points to gain upon fighting different opponents. In『Brave Hearts』, it was specified that the characters who participated in a battle would gain 100% of their experience points, while the characters who were put in a near-death state within the battle, or the ones who were kept as backup, would gain 70% of their experience points. And, even upon losing, there were still some experience points to gain.

In RPGs, although there weren't many experience points to gain from the monsters randomly encountered on the field, the boss characters were worth a great deal points.

That was even more true in Harold's case, as he was the boss character who had the most fights with the hero's party.

The original Harold was worth 8000 points in his first battle, 35,000 in his second battle, and in his last battle he was worth 72,000 experience points. Currently, considering his level, Harold was probably worth around 60,000 experience points.

Upon losing a battle against an opponent, the experience gained would be of 10% that opponent's worth in points. So, in Harold's case, it would be 6,000

points.

And, at level thirty, 5000 experience points were needed to level up. That would be raised to about 6000 or more starting from level 35, but still, Francis would be able to gain a level every time he fought once or twice.

That was how far Harold had pushed his calculations, however, he had no way to ascertain this as he had no real proof of it. So, naturally, Harold had considered the possibility that no matter how many times he beat down Francis, it would be meaningless.

However, if this hypothesis was right, he could hope for a tremendous strengthening of Francis' capacities. If he missed this chance where he could move freely with only few restrictions before going back to being Justus' chess piece, Harold would have a hard time to fight Liner and the others as many times as the original Harold did in the game's story.

Therefore, if Harold was going to do it, now was the time. Francis was severely criticized by the game's players, they often put him out of their starting lineup, calling him "Delicate", a "jack of all trades, master of none", or even a "destitute prince", and to make matters worse, "clearing the game with the prince in your lineup" was even considered an achievement that needed a special game-play. So if Harold could actually strengthen him, it would surely raise the strength of the hero's party as a whole.

As for how he was going to be defeated, Harold could still think of a way to do that while fighting.

While feeling slightly despaired about that, Harold drove a kick towards Francis' flank.

Translator's note: This one was complicated, I hope you guys still get what happened. It relies very much on the fact that you've read other novels, manga and the like. As for the experience points system, it might be weird for you but it's pretty similar to the one in Persona, and in many other JRPGs. Basically, if an opponent is worth 1000 points, everyone in the party gets 1000 points each, the dead/backup ones get 700 points, and upon losing, the player 100 points.

Chapter 71

(Francis' Pov)

Francis felt an impact strike him. He did not understand what happened as his body was blown away.

His field of view was changing at high speeds to the point where he couldn't really tell what was reflected in it. His body, that had lost its freedom, was rolling while bouncing on the ground over and over again, until it stopped at last, as Francis felt another big impact on his back.

From the tip of his hazy consciousness, Francis noticed that one section of the fences that were surrounding the horse riding place had been destroyed. Perhaps his body, after suffering some sort of attack, was finally stopped by breaking the fence.

But that meant he had rolled for tens of meters, at least.

Taking on an attack that powerful could not have been safe. Bit by bit, Francis' left flank started hurting. And soon, that pain became so great that he could not even groan, let alone move his body.

Indeed, it would have been no surprise to Francis if he were judged to be unable to keep fighting anymore. As Francis found himself in that state, someone walked up to him.

With his right cheek stuck to the ground, Francis slightly moved his neck only, so as to confirm that person's identity.

And that person was none other than Harold.

With his crimson and yet freezing cold eyes, he looked down on Francis. In fact, for Harold, this extremely boring result had probably been a killjoy.

Perhaps out of irritation from this, Harold slung merciless words at the already beaten up Francis.

"So, in the end, you were just a fool. The fact that a small fry like you got my hopes up ever so lightly is a disgrace that will follow me through life. How are you gonna make up for this?"

What an unreasonable thing to say! Thought Francis.

However, the damage that Francis had received were so serious that he couldn't even utter that complaint in return. Still, he endured the pain as he caught his breath, with all his might, at a rough and irregular rhythm. Harold grabbed Francis by his shoulders and pulled his body up.

"Oh well. You'll entertain me enough by struggling as best as you can, like the small fry that you are."

Having said that, Harold pushed something into Francis' mouth. That object felt inorganic. And subsequently, some liquid started flowing out of it.

Francis, who was unable to resist, gulped that liquid down his throat. Immediately after he drank that up, the intense pain that was torturing him disappeared, and his strength came back to his body. After confirming that, Harold took his hand away from Francis.

"That thing just now, was it Ether...?"

Ether, it was a recovery item.

Francis had tasted that flavor and sensation many times in the past. All the damage he had suffered from had recovered, but Francis was perplexed as he did not understand why Harold would do such a thing. As for Harold, he turned back, went to pick something up and threw it towards Francis. Stuck at Francis' feet was his own weapon, his rapier.

"Take it. The duel is not over yet."

".....I see how it is."

Apparently, Harold wanted to continue the contest despite the obvious result. As he recalled the attack he had just received, Francis wondered whether he should reach out to the rapier or not. Just the thought of falling victim to that attack once again made Francis feel frightened. However, Francis's pride did not allow him to withdraw and call it a day. So he stirred himself up as he picked the rapier and pointed it towards Harold while taking a stance.

Harold Stokes.

Based on hearsay, his personality was, generally speaking, notoriously bad. He was said to behave atrociously, as he killed people, stole from them, and

trampled their dignity underfoot. That man, who didn't think of people as people, could be said to be an inhuman devil.

Having heard that Harold was such a person, Francis went to warn his friend, Itsuki. *You should take your distance from him, he said, if you're being threatened by him, then I can help you with that.*

However, Itsuki's reaction was the opposite of what Francis expected. *Unlike what the rumors claim, he's not a bad man, in reality, he's the complete opposite of that.* Itsuki seemed to think that Harold had taken on that bad reputation on purpose.

And Francis' complaint was not able to convince Itsuki.

And so, Itsuki told Francis that he should check out Harold with his own eyes.

That's how the surprise attack on Harold came to be. And the results were terrible.

Neither surprised, nor afraid, nor angry, Harold had, perfectly calmly, grasped the situation and made Francis submit to him using nothing but mere words. This was more than enough to understand that there was more to Harold than just being a strong man.

At the same time, Francis figured he'd be held responsible for his rude actions.

However, what Harold proposed was a duel. Harold already had the advantage so he had nothing to gain by carrying his point across through that contest. And that was why that action helped Francis slightly understand Itsuki's appreciation of Harold. Because to Francis, it didn't seem like something a self-centered man would do.

And then, when he actually fought him, the difference in ability between him and Harold became obvious to Francis. He didn't expect to be that overpowered by martial arts alone, without the use of any weapons or magic. Though it was only vaguely, Francis experienced Harold's strength for himself, and he turned out to be stronger than anyone that Francis had fought up to now.

No matter how unpleasant that fact was for Francis, he was made to understand it with his own body. Francis' attacks all missed their target, and every time, he was promptly dealt with by being struck, kicked, and flung away. Moreover, whenever that happened, Francis, who was bent down on the

ground, was made to drink Ether by Harold, and was forced to fight.

"Stand up."

The drink recovered his stamina and healed his wounds, but it did nothing to fix the mental pressure that Francis kept receiving. He had been made to fall down to the ground more than ten times now. And in the end, despite the ether that he was made to drink, Francis was on one knee, unable to get up. Yet Harold mercilessly told him to stand.

Harold was angry. However, that didn't mean he was just attacking Francis on a whim. There were no signs of anger in Harold's mood at the Berlioz mansion, it was only after the start of the duel that Harold's state had changed. And then, adding onto that, came his earlier remarks that showed his disappointment.

All that brought Francis to one answer.

Harold was likely angry that Francis had tried to approach Erica while only having this much power.

Based on Harold's behavior, it seemed like he allowed Erica to have a relation with people other than himself, despite being her fiancé. However, that didn't seem to be because he didn't care about her.

Perhaps he was looking for someone, other than himself, who he could entrust Erica to. So the reason he had pressed Francis to make his relationship with Erica progress was to check whether Francis was worthy of being Erica's knight. As for why Harold tried to do that, Francis did not know. However, as he pondered on it, Francis was still able to understand some things.

Itsuki had said that Harold was not a bad man, and that he had taken on the many bad rumors about him on purpose. If, for argument's sake, that were true, then Harold had likely thought that it was impossible for himself to stand before Erica because she'd be at risk by his side, or something along those lines.

Therefore, he was likely looking for a man suitable for Erica, who could protect her. And yet a man, whose abilities were at a level that wasn't even worth discussing, had went to court her.

Perhaps that was the cause of Harold's anger.

Even so, Francis wanted to say.

You've got to be kidding me.

His anger was boiling up more and more in his stomach.

Harold was strong. Moreover, even in the kingdom, he'd be counted as being a top-level individual.

Then, there were also his brains. Francis could not compare with that man's ingenuity, with which he could carry out anything he wanted, and that discernment, that allowed him, in but an instant, to take into consideration various factors and elements and to make a concise judgement based on them. He was 18 years old, and he had overwhelming force, great wisdom, and he even had the enough guts to not even be agitated while having swords pointed at him.

The world would surely brand a great man with such brilliance as a genius.

So, for such a man to bring infamy to himself on his own initiative was the epitome of stupidity. Especially if he didn't want to expose his fiancée to the risks that came from that infamy.

Why did he have to be so roundabout about this? Francis wondered.

As strong as he was, Harold should have been more than capable of protecting Erica from most things. He was so worried about Erica's fate, and cared about her so much that he got this angry at Francis, so why couldn't he choose another measure than to go far away from Erica?

"You've got to be kidding me..."

Francis muttered so while slowly standing up. He spontaneously concentrated his power in his left hand, which was holding his rapier.

"What did you say?"

"I said, you have got to be kidding me. You're strong enough that I can't even reach your feet. So why don't you try to protect Erica in a more straightforward way?! With your strength, you can do that, right?! And that would be the best for her too, wouldn't it?!"

Francis shouted his heart out. He was angry at Harold, but he was also ashamed of himself for not being able to defeat him.

"....."

"Harold, you're a man who can do what I can't. But you don't even try to take on that role and you try to entrust other men with it. So if Erica were to become unhappy because of that, I'll blame you!"

If he cared about Erica, he had to protect her with his own hands. Surely, not doing that was akin to running away. Running away in fear of the time when he would not be able to protect Erica by himself. Francis was getting worked up, how could he let such a coward defeat him, that was— —.

"You're sure running your mouth a lot for someone who doesn't know anything."

Harold's ice cold voice cut Francis' thoughts right off. And the intimidating air fired off by Harold suppressed the fervor in Francis' feelings in but a moment. Francis was sweating all over his body and he couldn't stop himself from trembling.

He felt a pressure he had never experienced before, as if some completely unheard of monster was standing before him.

The moment Francis felt that, Harold became blurry to him. But when he realized it, Harold had already broken Francis' chance to dodge. Harold had attacked right from the front, but Francis was still caught completely off guard. It was a surprise attack made through pure speed, without any tricks.

Harold waved the black sword he was grasping in his left hand. As he felt a thick air of imminent death, Francis' body was stiff, he couldn't even move. It all happened in an instant, not even leaving Francis with enough time to prepare for his own death.

However, that death did not come. Instead, Francis felt an impact on his left arm.

Unable to defend, Francis staggered and fell on his backside.

"You're not worth killing so I'll give you an advice, bastard."

Said Harold, with cruel eyes, to Francis who could only look up to him.

"Erica isn't some frail and fickle woman who can do nothing but be protected by others. She has the strength to fight, and an unwavering will to oppose her

own fate. Don't go thinking she's just some pretty little flower. Because really, Erica is a mighty tree."

Not a pretty flower, but a mighty tree. That's how Erica looked like in Harold's eyes.

I see, said Francis, in agreement. Harold believed in Erica. He considered her to be someone at the same level as himself, who did not need his protection. It certainly had to be funny to watch Francis, who was much weaker than her, repeatedly talk of protecting her himself.

In the end, he was made to fully realize that he had only been able to see the outside of Erica.

He was charmed by her beauty, and he had arbitrarily assumed that her personality went hand to hand with that beauty. So being angry over that was not unreasonable in the slightest.

Francis' understanding of Erica and his feelings for her were no match for Harold's.

"..... It's my loss."

"What? Do you not see this, you moron?"

Harold showed the sword he was holding in his hand.

It was certainly Harold's loss since he had used his weapon, but Francis was not shameless enough to be able to claim such a thing.

After all, before this point, he had been utterly defeated.

"Don't make me say it again. The problem's with the rule that we agreed on before. I was never qualified to have a duel with you, Harold."

"Mhm, then, this time, let's call it a draw, shall we?"

Declared Itsuki, who had been watching in silence.

Francis had given up, and Harold had gone against the rules. Both of them had won, and both of them had also lost.

It would have felt better for Francis if this was counted as his loss, but maybe finding a point of compromise was fine as well.

"Tsk."

Perhaps still dissatisfied, Harold clicked his tongue and turned his back to the

duo. But Francis called that back to a stop.

"Harold, wait. Even if according to the rules, this is a draw, in the fight itself, I was completely defeated. So I'd like you to make me follow what you say as we agreed."

The purpose of the duel had been replaced with a marriage to Erica out of nowhere, but in reality, that was the actual main purpose.

"This is getting boring already. If you want to hit on Erica, do as you like. I just wish you could become a man who matches her."

"I'll be going back ahead of you. You just stay dead over there for a while." leaving Francis with those words, Harold left the place. But this time, Francis was not able to stop him.

He just laid on his back, face up.

"Say, Itsuki."

"What is it?"

"I was really stupid, wasn't I?"

"I don't know what's that coming from, but it's unusual for you to speak ill of yourself."

"In various ways, he showed me the difference in status between us, as a warrior, but also as a man."

At the end, Harold had told Francis to become a man who could match Erica. In other words, Francis had to acquire a strength that could rival with Harold's. Francis had been quite impolite and ungraceful but Harold did not give up on him, rather, even though he told him he was disappointed, he still approved of Francis ever so slightly. When he thought of that, Francis' feelings were filled with wonder and delight.

As for why Itsuki adored Harold; having now experienced Harold's tolerance for himself, Francis actually felt compelled to agree with Itsuki's assessment.

"I still have a long way to go. But today, I feel that I have seen the path which I should aim for."

He lied down and looked up at the clear and high sky, feeling like he could

open it and spread it everywhere.

To Francis, it seemed like it was showing him the way to his future.

Chapter 72

(Erica's Pov)

When she heard Itsuki say he was going sightseeing in Kablan with his friend, Francis, and Harold, Erica couldn't help but suspect that her elder brother was planning something strange.

At his core, Itsuki was a considerate and proud elder brother, but somehow, when it came to mediating the relationship between Harold and Erica, he was quite passionate. And Erica was glad that he liked Harold.

Perhaps he did that because he had noticed Erica's hidden feelings of love for Harold.

However, the problem came from Harold's side.

He himself did not want to marry Erica. So he obviously wouldn't think well of Itsuki pushing him into this so intensely.

And Erica knew why Harold was trying to avoid his marriage with her. In short, it was because she wasn't good enough.

That day eight years prior, Harold had severely reprimanded Erica, telling her she was being too soft and that her kindness was just self-satisfaction. That was an opportunity for her to change, with a clear determination to grow into someone who could support Harold.

Since then, she devoted herself to improving her heart, skills, and physique so that she would become a suitable partner for Harold. And yet, his back, that she kept chasing after, was still far away from her reach.

Because, while Erica made progress, so did Harold.

He just wouldn't stop. Therefore, Erica sometimes was crushed by uneasiness, wondering, how could she possibly catch up to him?

But whenever that weakness that lurked within her rose to her head, she would recall those tears that Harold secretly spilled that one day. Harold was also desperately fighting against his anxiousness and fear; by thinking that, Erica could find the strength in herself to recover her crushed heart.

She would tell herself that, someday, her efforts would bear fruit.

"Erica, is there something wrong?"

"Are you tired? Want me to go get some drinks?"

"Rather than that, let's go get some fresh air outside, shall we?"

While Erica lost herself in her thoughts a little, the surrounding men, having felt that there was something wrong, called out to her and competed to show their worry.

This was the second day of the celebration. Erica was in the lobby, and the guests weren't all the same as the ones in the banquet hall the day before. Many participants were waiting in here because the preparations in the banquet hall, where they were supposed to gather, had yet to be finished. There was still time before the start of the day's assembly. And Erica, who came around a bit too early, was surrounded by men in the blink of an eye. She thought they would hold back a little considering the previous day's happenings, but seeing that Harold was nowhere around her, they rushed and flocked towards her en masse.

Looking at their faces, half of them were part of the people who fell prey to Harold's blood thirst the day before, perhaps that meant that, in a way, they were quite mettlesome.

However, because those men showed too much interest towards Erica, it seemed like the other women who were participating weren't very pleased. Erica felt some eyes, full of jealousy, aimed at her. She could keep her distances from them if she were to leave the room, but with her being the main guest's relative, that solution would not give a very good impression.

And as Erica was troubled about how to settle this matter gently...

"Get out of my sight, you trash."

That sharp voice instantaneously cut off the place's rising heat. The men surrounding Erica were frozen still.

Harold was standing within the crowd, with a face that did not conceal his bad mood.

"I'll give you three seconds. If you want to experience the same thing as yesterday, then stay right here."

Without waiting for the three seconds to pass, the men left and scattered in all directions. As expected, it seemed like they had been quite frightened by the previous day's matter.

That incident turned out to be of a great help to Erica.

"Thank you, Lord-sama."

"It's my job. Keep your gratitude to yourself."

Erica thought that way of speaking in the imperative form was quite characteristic of him.

Without separating from Erica, Harold entrusted his back to a wall and crossed his arms. Having declared that it was his job, it seemed like he was planning to reliably play his role as Erica's guardian. His diligent personality, which was in complete contrast to his abusive language, was showing.

"Where were you?"

"I was just keeping Itsuki company."

"Once again, allow me to apologize in my brother's stead for troubling you."

"Like I told you, if you're gonna apologize, then just start managing that guy properly."

"I already told him not to do this but he..."

It was close to impossible to stop Itsuki, who was extremely fond of Harold, from being reckless. Erica instinctively felt like sighing.

Having likely guessed Erica's sentiment, Harold did not pursue the matter any further.

"Which reminds me, are my brother and Francis-sama not with you?"

"I left those two behind but... Erica"

"Yes?"

Just being called by her name made her heart throb. Erica hid that and replied while feigning calm as well as she could.

"Just now, you called Francis by his first name, didn't you?"

"Well, he said he prefers I call him that way."

"In other words, you don't think bad of him, right? "】

"I was surprised yesterday because of his sudden actions, but I don't really dislike him since I don't even know his personality yet."

She neither hated him nor liked him. The impression she had of him was that he was a kind of passionate person and was her elder brother's friend. However, after thinking about something, Harold asked Erica.

"If you were asked to marry Francis, would you accept?"

"w-"】

Erica desperately suppressed her voice so as not to let her emotions rise to the surface. She didn't understand what was Harold thinking when he asked that, but that question was enough to shake her spirit. Given her feelings, it would be very difficult for her to accept that marriage. Because that meant giving up on being Harold's companion. Erica's goal of supporting Harold did not necessarily require her to be bound to him. She was perfectly aware of that, in fact, if Harold were to become the companion of a woman other than her, Erica intended to give him her blessings.

However, it was unimaginable for Erica to marry someone else while Harold had yet to be bound to anyone. As long as she had the slightest chance of being chosen by Harold, it was enough for her. Therefore, she couldn't accept to marry someone else. That's likely what Erica would have answered if she was able to give priority to her own feelings.

"..... Right. I'm aware that you're not enthusiastic about getting married with me, so, though it would be difficult to do so right away, if it was my brother and father's decision, if it was for the sake of the Sumeragi household then I——"

I think I would accept that marriage. Those were the words Erica was about to say, however, she was interrupted by Harold.

"You idiot. This has nothing to do with your relatives or your household. I'm asking you, Erica Sumeragi, as a person. "】

What did Erica want to do as an individual? What if she could remove her situation and social status from the equation and make the decision with her own feelings?

In that case, then she had decided on an answer. It was the hope that had been continuously warming up within her for eight years already.

".... If I had the permission, then I would not accept the marriage. If at all possible, I.... I would like to be bound to the person I truly love."

Erica answered so while looking straight at Harold's eyes. Harold took on that gaze for a short while, and then turned his face slightly down, as if to cut off his connection with Erica's line of sight.

"....I see."

Erica might have been mistaken about this, but, as Harold said that with his cold voice, she saw some satisfaction on his face.

(Just now, that smile was...?)

Unlike his usual cynical sneer, it felt as if he had a gentle smile. But that was only for an instant and there was no way to ascertain it. Even if Erica tried to confirm it from him, he would only deny it.

"Humph, so you're back at last."

Following Harold's line of sight, Itsuki and Francis were walking towards here, side by side. Upon seeing them approach, Harold moved his back away from the wall he had been leaning on.

"If you're together with these guys, then you won't be approached by any of those disturbing insects. I'll be resting in my room until the start of the celebration."

Having said that, Harold disappeared from the lobby. And Itsuki and Francis came around to trade places with him.

"Where did Lord go?"(*Itsuki*)

"He said he would be resting in his room until the start of the party."(*Erica*)

"Well, I guess we tired him out."(*Itsuki*)

"If even Lord is tired, then what about me?"(*Francis*)

"Then, you're going to rest in your room, too, Franck?"(*Itsuki*)

"I'd like to, but, before that, would you give me just a little bit of your time,

Erica?"(Francis)

"Well, I don't mind but..."(Erica)

Erica glanced at her brother. Although Itsuki disliked it when Francis interacted with Erica, this time he didn't say anything. In others words, he gave his permission for that.

Had he somehow changed his mind?

"It's a difficult talk to have here. Let's go out to the garden. "】

Following Francis' lead, Erica went out to the mansion's courtyard. Since there was a terrace in the garden, there were some people chatting there, but Francis went away from them, and when he came to a place where there was no one else nearby, he stopped his feet at last.

Erica was a bracing herself a little considering Harold's question from earlier.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I thought I'd apologize to you for yesterday. Sorry for my abrupt actions."

"Please raise your head. I was certainly surprised, but you don't have to apologize, I'm not angry."

"Thank you. However, I'm not apologizing for you alone."

"What do you mean? By any chance, were you told something by my brother?"

"No, I'm doing this for Lord.... or rather, Harold. Oh, hmm, I won't tell anyone else about him, so please don't worry."

"..... How did you find out?"

"I had no proof of it, but when I went to Itsuki to confirm it, he easily confessed the truth."

"He's so..."

Erica felt her head aching.

It seemed like some punishment would be needed later on. This, including Itsuki's attempts to sway Harold, demanded something more than some healhearted warning.

However, putting that aside, how was an apology to Erica related to Harold?

"So, as I was saying, I got quite the sermon from Harold."

"A sermon, you say?"

"In summary, he said something like『Someone of your pathetic level can't possibly handle Erica.』He turned out to be way scarier as an opponent than Itsuki."

Francis smiled wryly. From what he said, it seemed like Harold had repelled Francis for approaching Erica.

However, that was impossible. Because Harold did not want to be married to Erica, so if she were to be bound to someone else, it would have been convenient for him.

There was likely a misunderstanding. That was probably it.

"...Aren't you somehow mistaken? It doesn't quite seem like Harold-sama to put in a word about these kinds of matters."

"Wha-.. Could it be that Harold didn't tell you anything, Erica? That man is so difficult."

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to believe that Harold doesn't think much of you, but it's not that surprising. This is what he told me:『Erica isn't some frail and fickle woman who can do nothing but be protected by others. She has the strength to fight, and an unwavering will to oppose her own fate. So don't got thinking she's just some pretty little flower.』"

"D, did Harold-sama really say that?"

"If you still have some doubts, then just ask Itsuki. Honestly, it felt like he was showing me the large difference between my feelings towards you, and his."

Something so convenient could not be possible. Far from her being half-convinced, her doubts had actually taken the advantage over her by far. However, on the other hand, Erica couldn't help but wonder, what if it was true? That reality was perhaps what she wanted more than anything else. And no matter how many times she told herself to settle down, she still had some

hope.

"...Gee, if you show this kind of face, I won't feel like being jealous anymore."

"Huh?"

"I don't know if you're desperately trying to hide it or whatever, but your joy is clearly showing. I guess if it was me, I wouldn't be able to get you to make that kind of expression, right?"

As that was pointed out, Erica promptly put her hands on her face. Her cheeks had shaped themselves in a way that displayed her great delight. Having become conscious of that, Erica was full of embarrassment.

"No, that, this, it doesn't mean that....."

"Pft..... Ahahahaha"

Erica was completely flustered as she couldn't find an excuse. Looking at her being in such a state, Francis was unable to bear it and burst out laughing. That made Erica's shyness rise even more.

"P, please stop laughing at me...."

"My bad, my bad. But with this, I understand clearly. It would be quite boorish of me to try to force my way in between you and Harold."

"That's..."

"I have no idea what happened between you two, but the both of you are seriously thinking of each other and you're just not being honest. Looks like there is no room for anybody else to butt in."

Declared Francis, with a cheerful face.

It was hard to believe for Erica, because Harold had never turned this type of words and feelings towards her, but she recalled his smile from earlier. Since the day before, Francis was constantly trying to appeal to Erica. What if that made Harold a little jealous or anxious? What if that smile meant that Harold was relieved that Erica said she didn't want to marry Francis?

"Then, I couldn't be happier..."

In a voice low enough that Francis wouldn't be able to hear it, Erica spoke her honest feelings.

Chapter 73

The Berlioz' family's celebrations lasted for three days. Then came the moment for Harold's stressful mission of guarding Erica to end at last. He was completely exhausted and wanted to let out a very long sigh. He felt like he owed himself some praise for carrying out his duty to its end despite the heavy mental fatigue it brought him.

Through a conspiracy between Itsuki and Justus, Harold had been forcefully made to escort Erica, without even being notified. And once he stepped into the Berlioz' residence, he was attacked by the head of the household, a hot-blooded man with a muscle-brain who, once he was beaten by Harold, offered him to take his eight-year-old daughter as a bride. Just when he thought things couldn't get worse, he was attacked once again, this time by one of the original story's characters who was participating in the celebrations. To stop him and calm the matter, Harold proposed to have a duel, which somehow turned into a death match with a marriage with Erica at stake.

Upon enumerating these events once more, it seemed to Harold like he had suffered through a massive series of disasters.

Incidentally, on the last day of the celebration, Francis was acting over-familiar with Harold, while in contrast, Erica was acting somehow suspiciously, and, watching that happen, Itsuki was grinning from beginning to end despite being very calm on the whole. Due to Harold's presence, no other men gathered around Erica, so it was safe to say that Harold had carried out his duty perfectly.

However, Harold did not feel any sense of fulfillment or accomplishment. What he felt however was pent-up resentment towards Justus and Itsuki who had deceived him.

However, concerning Itsuki, it seemed like on the evening of the celebration's second day, Erica made him go through some intense moxibustion. Hearing him apologize to her with a tearful voice was sufficient for Harold to lose his grudge. So the only one left was Harold's annoying boss, Justus. After once again being shaken in the carriage for two days, Harold returned to the royal capital; he

then single-mindedly went to the research center and forced the door to Justus' laboratory open with such strength that he almost kicked it down. Harold's anger was so intense that even the staff members, who would usually pour out all their hostility on him, averted their eyes.

"The hell was that about, Justus?!"

His tone of voice was horrifying, as if he had just crawled out from under the ground. But that did not break Justus' habitual cold behavior.

"You're back? I won't be needing a report for this time's mission. It was just for playing around after all."

Said Justus, and after no more than single glance towards Harold, he returned to his work.

Harold hadn't come here with the goal of making his report. Justus knew that perfectly well when he spoke those words to him, which made this all the more irritating.

"Yeah, what a lame farce this was. I won't cooperate with you to act upon such stupid matters again, bastard."

"Cooperate? Don't forget that you're just a pawn under my control. Know your place, Harold."

Justus spoke that indifferently, yet it was an established fact. Even if Harold was sarcastic with him and complained, he was just abusing of Justus' goodwill. No matter the incident or the happening, Justus would always draw every single conclusion all by himself to bring said event to its completion. He could not be shaken by others, and it was impossible to influence him. The strength of his will was akin to a monster's. Still, Harold would have felt unsatisfied if he didn't talk to him about this.

"We'll see if you can handle me. However, I have some ideas if you ever stick me to those people again. "】

"Is that fiancée of yours that important to you?"

"You're joking, right? That girl and I are completely incompatible, just like you and I, if not more."

"Ahahaha, you say some interesting things! However, that's only natural, isn't it? Because you and I are the same."

Justus exaggeratedly spread his arms, laughing as his shoulders shook. His eyes were like an abyss, there was no trace of light in them, and yet his cheeks were distorted up into a crazy smile as he looked at Harold. Harold could not bear to be treated as being similar to such a lunatic. He had said what he wanted to say at least, and speaking anything more than this would only make things worse and more unpleasant for him.

While Harold was about to leave in a hurry, Justus kept talking to him with an intoxicated tone of voice.

"No matter how you try to smooth yourself over, at your core, you're just like me. We're both mad men who would do absolutely anything to reach their goals, aren't we?"

To cut off the insults that were being poured on him, Harold struck the laboratory's door with the same strength that had almost broken it when he entered the room.

Though he had come to complain, in the end, he was even more irritated. He had gotten his priorities backward.

Harold could not even hide his irritation from his outside appearance. In such a state, he, who was already disliked even at the best of times, would be approached by nobody.

Nobody, except for one person.

"Oh, you came back."

Harold suddenly came across Elu, who was coming from the opposite direction. Despite Harold having an aura of displeasure overflowing from him, Elu did not hesitate to call out to him.

However, Lifa was nowhere near him.

"What about the girl?"

"If you mean Lifa, she's in her room. She's preparing to go back to her hometown tomorrow."

"I see. Did you have any trouble in my absence?"

"I don't know if you'd call that trouble, but Justus told me about how he met you."

"What kind of bullshit did he tell you?"

Having listened to Elu, who answered Harold's question, it seemed like he had been told an overly-dramatic version of the already kind of dramatic scene of Harold's encounter with Justus. Though the facts were included at 100%, there were many parts that differed from what actually happened. The part about the sword was completely untrue, and Justus had cruelly emphasized how dangerous Harold was as a person.

And the exact words that had come out of Harold's mouth were "Give me power and I'll teach you what true hell is, bastard." but it seemed like even that had been somewhat dramatized.

Harold did not understand what Justus wanted to do with him. He had predicted that he would be used as a chess piece for Justus' plans, but for some reason, he was starting to feel like there was more to this than that.

Well, as long as Justus did not stop his own plans, Harold would probably be able to secure a position where he could perceive the flow of events using what knew of the scenario of the game's story.

"And that's pretty much it, however, I'm not the only one he told this to, Lifa was listening as well."

"I see."

"..... Is that it?"

Though Elu asked that with a dubious face, Harold had nothing else to respond.

It was because he was under Justus' control that he could walk around in broad daylight, and the main cause was that he was supposed to be "A test subject who's to test the sword developed by Justus for some practical experiments." Even Elu had failed to grasp the actual truth of the matter, therefore, Harold could not easily speak of it, and so it was safer to just confirm the things related to this.

Well, Elu was going to become Harold's collaborator, so Harold had better find a chance to eventually speak of this to him.

"What else is there to say?"

"Well, I see your point, but Lifa got quite the shock from this...."

(Shock, huh?.....)

Though he didn't know at what level that shock was, it was a normal feeling to have upon finding out that someone she knew was going to die, even if said someone was a person she often quarreled with.

Nevertheless, fact was that there was nothing Harold could say to her in particular. If, for example, he could speak to her in a sympathetic way to console her, it would only hurt Lifa's feelings as, to her, that would just feel like a dying man's attempt to cheer her up. Therefore, he thought that maybe it would be better to come in contact with her in the usual way rather than to take on a different attitude.

"....You said she's in her room, right?"

"Ah, yes"

Still, though it was troublesome, he would feel bad if he simply ignored the situation. So Harold went towards the room where Lifa was staying to take a look.

As for Elu, after saying "Please take care of her.", he left and went towards the direction opposite to Harold's. However, even though Elu was being considerate, Harold actually wanted him to accompany him and back him up, because his mouth was not going to be able to say a single word of comfort. While thinking of deplorable things like that, Harold knocked on the door to Lifa's room.

"Who is it?"

It was a listless voice that did not fit the usually high-spirited Lifa. When he thought back upon it, Lifa had started acting strange a little while before Harold departed to Kablan.

But still, that didn't help him understand the reason behind that.

"Hurry and open the damn door."

As soon as he said so, he heard clattering sounds from within the room. The noises of various objects falling down continued for a little while, and once

it settled, the door opened at last. However, there was only a gap of a few centimeters.

Therefore, Harold thrust the tip of his toes into that opening, and mercilessly forced the door open.

"Ah.....!"

Because of how forcefully the door was opened, Lifa stumbled forward. At that moment, Harold happened to see her face that looked surprised, but also worried.

Probably because he expected her to look depressed, to Harold, Lifa, who was more slender than she used to be, looked more pretty and delicate than ever. Though the possibility that she had lost weight out of worry and sadness for him made Harold glad, his happiness was underwhelmed by the pain he felt in his heart as this worry was the result of a falsehood.

"I heard I'd get to watch the rare sight of you looking like a sad sack but you're more normal than expected. This is boring."

"What's that?!"

Harold's sarcasm managed to trigger Lifa in but a second. Her boiling point was way too low.

On the other hand, that meant she was easy to handle.

"You're speaking as badly as ever... And whose fault is it that I was feeling down?!"

"You listened to that story of your own accord, and you're feeling down of your own accord. I don't recall saying a single word to you."

"- - - Uh!"

Lifa was so angry from Harold's complaint that she was at a loss for words. Her face was bright red.

Though they had a tense relationship, he'd probably be able to get along with her without that bringing him any trouble in the future.

"Enough already! If you're going to be like this, I won't worry about you anymore!"

"Are you kidding me? I haven't fallen low enough to need your worry, idiot."

"You really have a comeback to everything.... And yet, it looks like you'll never be willing to break your own determination, no matter what."

"What do you mean?"

"I asked Doctor Justus about the details of what happened after the tribunal pronounced your sentence. And he said that, because you wanted power, because you wanted to become strong, you allied yourself with him."

"....."

Harold affirmed it through his silence. Accepting that, Lifa then asked him.

"But I think you're plenty enough strong already, and yet you're trying to gain strength so hard that you're willing to exchange your own life for power, why is that?"

That was a bad question to ask of Harold at this point in time. The reason why he wanted power was already clear. Because if he were directly attacked by a death flag, it was his fighting strength that would make the difference between life and death. And, moreover, if it wasn't for him going along with Justus' story until now, then he would have been executed. In any case, if he could avoid his death flags before they appeared, that would be the best, but if he followed the events of the game's story, then he would have to fight three times against the hero's party and manage to barely get away with his life every single time. Assuming the worst, there was even a risk that he would have to take over some of the events that the protagonists were supposed to deal with. In preparation for those times, Harold had to be strong. That was why he felt the way he did about death, so as to completely avoid, break, and survive against his death flags.

"That's a dumb question. There is something I have to do no matter what, even if I have to risk my life for it."

He was genuinely hanging between life and death. Otherwise, he would not have been able to continue training ten hours a day or more for as long as eight years. He was able to do it because great efforts were needed to rework the

reality of his death that he could not avoid by merely working on his character.

"Even if you have to risk your life for it? Really, you're so...."

Probably from the fact that Harold intended to keep going even though she thought he didn't have much longer to live, Lifa was at a loss for words. For some reason, it seemed like she was not able to look straight at Harold.

"Well, still, I believe there is nothing in this world that is worth as much as my life. There is no way in hell I'm gonna let myself get killed easily."

He was not going to die, he said it so arrogantly and with such a mysterious self confidence that one could not simply find it in themselves to call out how incoherent it was. Any listener would just be utterly stunned.

"Hah.... You are that kind of person after all. If that's really how you feel, it's quite amazing."

Just like Harold planned, a smile returned to Lifa's face, though only slightly. There was quite a lot of shock on her face as well, but it was still much better than her having a depressed facial expression.

With time, she would come to realize that the story about Harold dying from his magical power being drained by a sword was a lie. But, rather than letting her gravely worry until said time, Harold was more at ease with getting her to perceive this as the slightly funny story of some reckless idiot who was just throwing his life down the gutter.

Well, judging by how things currently looked, it was probably going to be fine. And in any case, they were probably going to be antagonists to each other the next time they would meet after their parting the next day. It would be bad but it would help her get over the matter.

Harold thought so as he started leaving the room, but he stopped his feet as Lifa called him to a halt with a "Wait, one more thing.". But when he tried to turn his head around, Harold was deprived of his hearing, making him wonder what on earth was going on.

And it wasn't by the use of some kind of magic spell either. He couldn't confirm it since he had his back turned the other way, but he guessed that Lifa was standing on the tip of her toes and blocking his ears with her hands.

That lasted for a mere few seconds. And by the time Harold grasped the

situation, Lifa's hands had already gone away.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing really~ It's just that there was something I didn't want you to hear."

"Then just say it after I'm gone", Harold naturally wanted to retort, but he swallowed that back. He felt very sluggish due to the worry and tiredness that piled up during his long trip. Defeated by his desire to hurry and get to sleep, in the end, failed to see through the profound meaning behind the girl's action. When Harold thought back upon this later, perhaps things would not have developed in such a troublesome direction if he had questioned Lifa properly this time. Still, it was no use crying over split milk.

However, in the future, this choice was going to come back to bite him.



The sky was clear, and the fresh south wind was calmly blowing on the many flowering plants.

It was a good day to set off.

Liner, who had grown from a boy to a young man, stroked the handle of the sword at his waist for a moment as he looked up at the empty sky and took a deep breath.

"Liner, are you really going?"

The one asking that with an uneasy voice was Colette, who could also be said to have grown from a girl to a woman. However, just like her voice, her facial expression was filled with worry, and she was teary-eyed. It seemed like one light push would get her tear glands to break down.

To give Colette some peace of mind, Liner showed her a smile as dazzling as the sun.

"Don't worry so much. They escaped towards the neighboring town so I won't be going far."

"But it's dangerous! There are monsters outside of the village, and you'll probably have to fight the people whom even Leona-san and Olbel-san were unable to defeat, right?!"

Colette brought up the names of Liner's parents in an attempt to hold him

back. To her, Liner's actions were wild and unrealistic.

The night before, some thieves had trespassed in Liner's residence. Although the thieves had come to steal from a warehouse that was separated from the house itself, however Leona happened to notice them by chance and rushed to battle.

The fight was two on two. Although they hadn't been in an actual fight in a long time, Olbel and Leona, who were once capable adventurers, were overwhelmed by the movements of the thieves who were moving as if slipping into the darkness while wearing jet black robes with hoods which were pulled low over their eyes. Since it was like that for Olbel and Leona when they fought them, there was no doubting the thieves' strength.

By the end of the fight, Leona was severely wounded on her left leg, and Olbel on his flank. Then, in the nick of time, Liner barged into the place. Though he attacked the thieves having caught them off guard, the strike was not a direct hit; but still, he did cut off the robe of one of them.

And at that moment, for just an instant, he saw the thief's pale face which was exposed under the light of the moon that was shining through the gaps in the clouds. Taking on that chance, the thieves dispersed and narrowly escaped from the Griffith's residence.

However, that didn't mean that everything was fine. The thieves had stolen a treasured sword that the Liner's parents had obtained, from inside some historic ruins, when they were still active adventurers.

In reality, it was supposed to be passed to Liner once he left the village for the sake of realizing his dream of becoming a knight leader. Liner could not let the sword be snatched away like that.

"I'm the only one who knows his face. And, also, I'm the only one who can fight them."

Now that his parents had been injured, Liner was confident that he was the only one in this village who could fight with the thieves.

Therefore, he was determined to get back the treasured sword with his own hands.

"So please just wait for a little while. I'm entrusting you with my father and mother, alright?"

"Uh....."

Colette knew that Liner wasn't one to yield after making a decision. Therefore, she was aware that she couldn't persuade him anymore. I don't want you to go. I want you to stay by my side. Though such thoughts were dominating within Colette, she could not let them out. She felt that if she said that, it would be akin to exposing her weakness as one who had become accustomed to being protected. If she had been able to tell him that she would follow him this time, if she had been self-confident enough to say it, then perhaps the journey that was awaiting Liner would have had a different conclusion.

"Well then, Colette, I'm off."

Step by step, Liner moved away. And Colette was only able to see him off. They had no way of knowing that these extraordinary steps were the first of a long and grand journey that would involve even the fate of the world.